

Issue: AZ - Opioid Crisis

## Talking Points: The Opioid Crisis in Arizona

### A Crisis of Poverty, Trauma, Pain, and Availability

Since 1999, the national opioid crisis has resulted in 700,000 deaths in the United States. At least two million Americans are addicted to opioids, and more than ten million misuse them.

In Arizona, where more people die from drug overdoses than car crashes, opioid use, abuse, and deaths have all increased at an alarming rate over the last fifteen years. Despite significant legislative and public health efforts, the number of opioid deaths rose from 790 in 2016 to 1,375 in 2018. At 92.5%, Arizona had the largest relative increase in synthetic opioid-involved deaths in the country between 2017 and 2018.

A number of factors have contributed to the epidemic of opioid abuse, including over-prescription, aggressive marketing and lobbying efforts by pharmaceutical companies, black market availability, and the stress and despair associated with chronic pain and poverty.

### Arizona Fights Back

In 2016, the Arizona Department of Health Services issued its first Opioid Report, which documented a growing crisis, including a 74% increase in the number of opioid deaths between 2012 and 2016. The Department also issued two Opioid Action Plans, one in 2017 and a second in 2019. Both plans outline efforts to address the opioid crisis through educational outreach, changed prescribing regulations, improved data collection, and better treatment for those suffering from opioid use disorder.

Between 2016 and 2019, the Arizona legislature passed six bills, and Governor Ducey issued two executive orders to address the opioid crisis. Most significantly, the Opioid Epidemic Act (SB1001), which passed unanimously in January 2018, included expanded funding for treatment, changes in prescribing rules for new patients, and new addiction curricula for health care professionals.

During the same time period, many of Arizona's cities, counties, and tribes joined the thousands of locales across the country that filed civil lawsuits against drug manufacturers. State Attorney General Mark Brnovich also filed a suit in the US Supreme Court against Purdue Pharma in 2018.

### Going Forward

Arizona currently spends \$265 million a year on opioid prevention and treatment and has seen some successes. The number of opioid prescriptions is down 13% from 2017. However, overdoses and fatalities from illicit opioids continue to rise. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the situation; suspected overdoses increased by 18% in March, 29% in April, and 42% in May 2020.

This complex crisis needs to be addressed through an intensive multi-pronged approach, including federally coordinated research efforts, the use of new technologies, the dismantling of antiquated laws and regulations, and perhaps most importantly, the fostering of an attitude of compassion and care for society's most vulnerable.

Our complete report: *The Opioid Epidemic in Arizona* is available at  
<https://www.localmajority.org/research-reports/#az-opioids>