

Parental Loss from Drug Overdose: Science and Response Strategies to Support Children and their Families

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Luisa Kcomt, PhD
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Who We Are



Institute for Research, Education
& Training in Addictions

To help people respond effectively
to substance use and
related problems



For children bereaved by their
parents' overdose death to thrive
through optimized and coordinated
support services

Today's Presenters

Moderator & Presenter

Eric Hulsey

Executive Director
Institute for Research,
Education & Training in
Addictions



Presenter

Sean Esteban McCabe

Professor and Director
University of Michigan
Center for the Study of
Drugs, Alcohol, Smoking,
and Health



Presenter

Luisa Kcomt

Assistant Professor
Wayne State University



Presenter

Melanie Touchard

Doctoral Student
Binghamton University



Learning Objectives

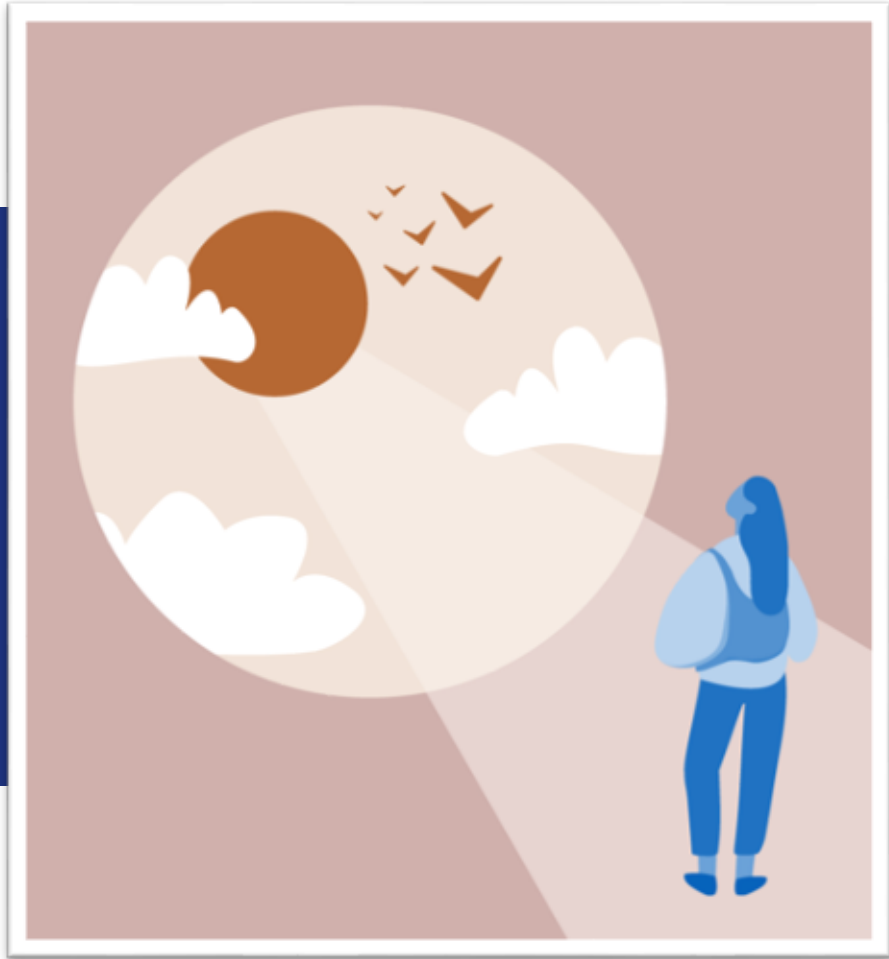


Summarize the prevalence and trends of parents who have died from overdose death and the health outcomes of children bereaved from parental overdose death.

Explain the experiences of families bereaved by overdose death.



Develop strategies to support children and families bereaved by parental overdose death.



Parental Overdose Deaths and Childhood Outcomes

Background

**48.4
Million**

**U.S. adults have a DSM-5
substance use disorder (SUD)**

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2025). *Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (HHS Publication No. PEP25-07-007, NSDUH Series H-60). Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-surveydrug-use-and-health/national-releases>



**1 in 4 U.S. children live
with a parent with a DSM-5
SUD**

Source: McCabe, S.E., McCabe, V.V., & Schepis, T.S. (2025). US children living with a parent with substance use disorder. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 179(7), 797-799. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2025.0828>

U.S. Drug Overdose Fatalities



Adult deaths since 2000



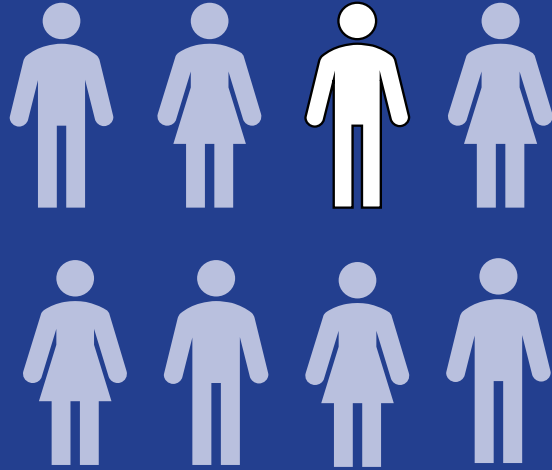
Adult deaths in 2023

Source:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, May 14). *Statement from CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control on Provisional 2024 Overdose Death Data*. CDC Newsroom. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2025/2025-statement-from-cdcs-national-center-for-injury-prevention-and-control-on-provisional-2024.html>

Garnett, M. F., & Minino, A. M. (2024). *Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 2003–2023* (NCHS Data Brief No. 522). National Center for Health Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db522.pdf>

Overdose Loss



**Adults experienced
overdose loss**

Source: Athey, A., Kilmer, B., & Cerel, J. (2024). An Overlooked Emergency: More Than One in Eight US Adults Have Had Their Lives Disrupted by Drug Overdose Deaths. *American Journal of Public Health*, 114(3), 276–279. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2023.307550>

From 2011 to 2021

320,000

**children lost a parent to
drug overdose**

Source: Jones, C. M., Zhang, K., Han, B., Guy, G. P., Losby, J., Einstein, E. B., Delphin-Rittmon, M., Volkow, N. D., & Compton, W. M. (2024). Estimated Number of Children Who Lost a Parent to Drug Overdose in the US From 2011 to 2021. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 81(8), 789–796. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2024.0810>

Childhood Outcomes

Change in residence, family structure



Lower academic performance



Morbidity and mortality



Mental and substance use disorders



Court involvement



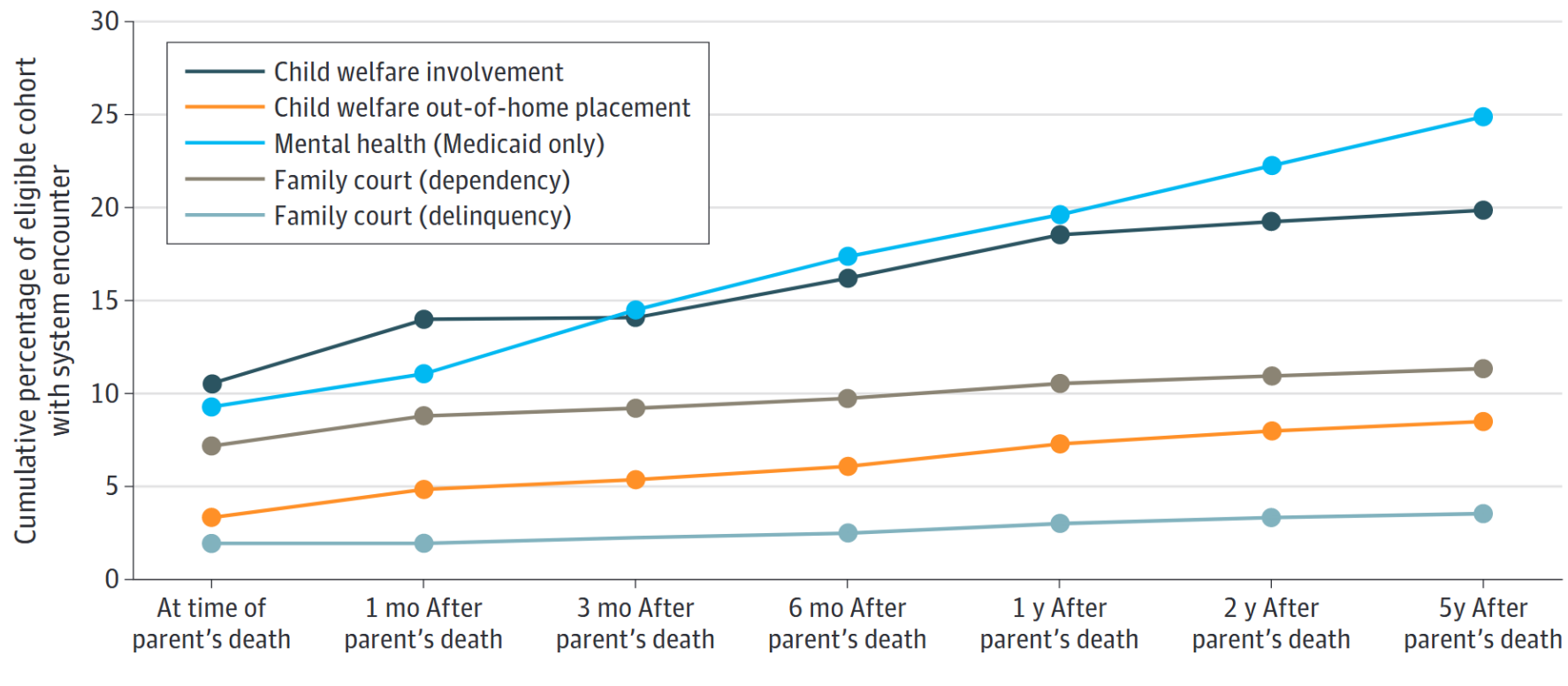
Source:

Hulsey, E. G., Li, Y., Hacker, K., Williams, K., Collins, K., & Dalton, E. (2020). Potential emerging risks among children following parental opioid-related overdose death. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 174(5), 503–504.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.0613>

Liu, C., Grotta, A., Hiyoshi, A., Berg, L., & Rostila, M. (2022). School outcomes among children following death of a parent. *JAMA Network Open*, 5(4), e223842.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.3842>

Potential Emerging Risks Among Children Following Parental Opioid-Related Overdose Death

Figure. Mental Health and Human Services Encounters Following Parental Overdose Death



Source: Hulsey, E. G., Li, Y., Hacker, K., Williams, K., Collins, K., & Dalton, E. (2020). Potential emerging risks among children following parental opioid-related overdose death. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 174(5), 503–504. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.0613>

By 2030...

**4.3
Million**

Children and families impacted
by the opioid epidemic

**\$400
Billion**

Lifetime costs from healthcare,
child welfare, social programs,
special education, and criminal
justice spending

Source: Brundage, S. C., Fifield, A., & Partridge, L. (2019). The ripple effect: National and state estimates of the U.S. opioid epidemic's impact on children. United Hospital Fund. https://uhfnyc.org/media/filer_public/6e/80/6e80760f-d579-46a3-998d-1aa816ab06f6/uhf_ripple_effect_national_and_state_estimates_chartbook.pdf

Data-Driven Insights: Transforming Vital Records into Actionable Intelligence

Source:
https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Parental_Overdoses_Child_Beareavement_08_2025.pdf

Children and Young Adults in Allegheny County Who Lost a Parent to an Overdose, 2016–2023



August 2025



Allegheny County
Department of Human Services
One Smithfield Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222
<https://analytics.alleghenycounty.us/>

Data-Driven Insights: Transforming Vital Records into Actionable Intelligence

Source:

<https://www.michigan.gov/opioids/-/media/Project/Websites/opioids/documents/Children-Whose-Parents-Died-Due-to-Drug-Poisoning.pdf?rev=907c5bf9f2e74ebe8e607cb04a34be0b>

Children Whose Parents Died Due to Drug Poisoning

Michigan
2000-2022



Key Findings

- **Nearly 17,000** minor children had a parent, or parents, die due to drug poisoning between 2000 and 2022 in Michigan.
- **One-third** of minor children were **13-17 years old** when their parent died due to drug poisoning between 2000 and 2022 in Michigan.
- **Arenac, Benzie, Clinton, Crawford, Lake and Manistee** counties had the highest rate of minors whose parent died due to drug poisoning between 2018 and 2022 in Michigan.

Background

Between 2000-2022, 37,731 lives have been lost due to drug poisoning in Michigan, yet the impact on the decedent's children has not been widely studied. Studies investigating adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) show that parental substance use increases risk for substance use by the child,¹ particularly if the parental substance use occurred during teenage years (13-17).² Of all child removal cases by Children's Protective Services (CPS) in Michigan in 2022, parental substance use was a factor in approximately 40% of cases.³ A meta-analysis assessing parents with opioid use disorder (OUD) and behaviors of their children found the following when comparing to children of parents without OUD⁴:

- Children were more likely to have disorganized attachment, were less likely to seek social contact and were more avoidant.
- Children were more likely to have emotional and behavioral issues, perform poorly in school and have poor social skills.
- Younger children were more likely to be abused and/or neglected leading to unemployment, legal issues and substance use later in life.

The [Michigan ACE Initiative](#) is a coalition of cross-sector partners committed to raising awareness of the prevalence and impact of ACEs on children and communities. Because of this connection, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) conducted a linkage of birth and death certificates to identify children of parents who died by drug poisoning and inform the need of child bereavement support services. See page 5 for resources to learn more about ACEs.

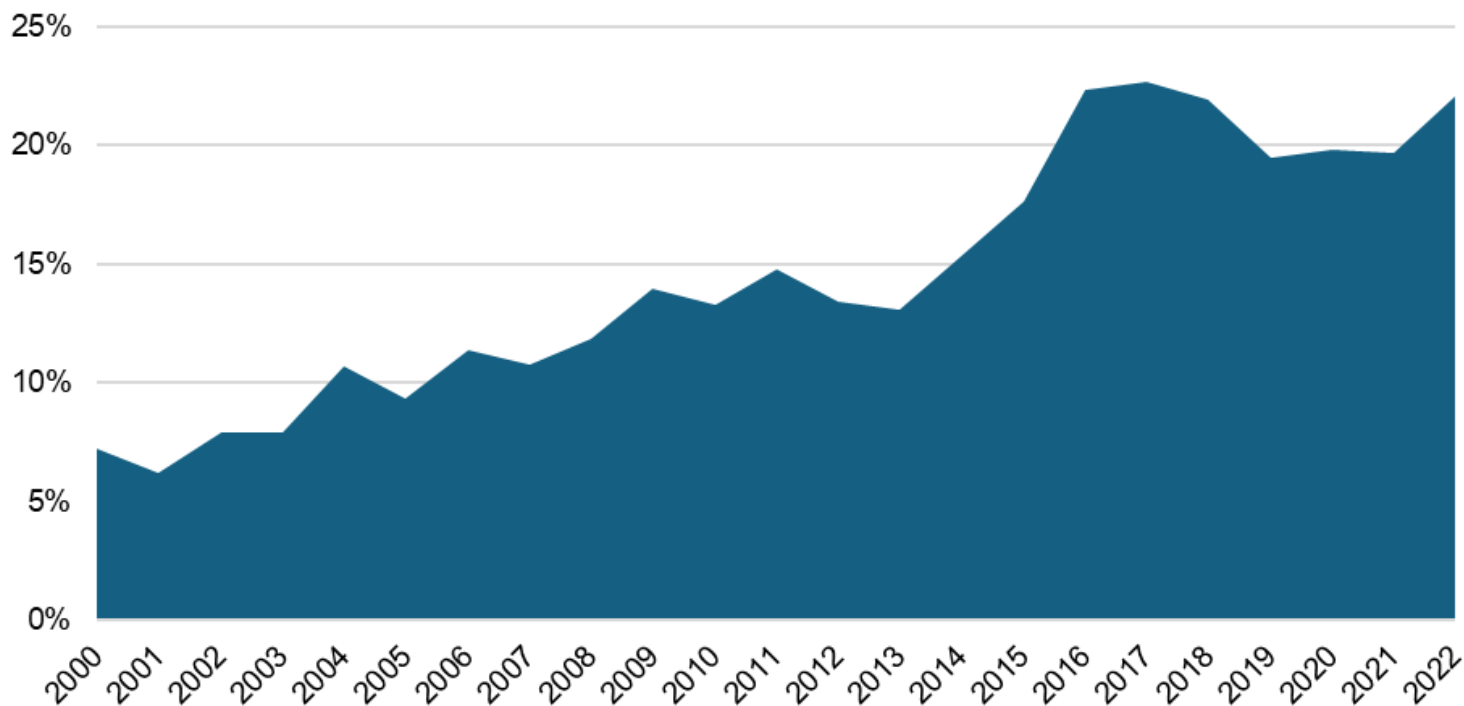
Methods

Death certificates of Michigan residents who died due to any cause between 2000-2022 were linked to birth certificates between 1989-2022 by matching the **biological parent's first name, last name and date of birth**. These linked records were then restricted to parental deaths due to **drug poisoning** (ICD-10 codes X40-X49, X60-X694, X85-X90 and Y10-Y19) and those instances in which the decedent had **at least one minor child (less than 18 years old) at time of death**. Statistics and trends pertaining to children who lost at least one parent due to drug poisoning were derived from variables on both the birth and death certificates and are reported here. Rates were calculated using data on the population of children under age 18 from the social vulnerability index (SVI) created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).⁵

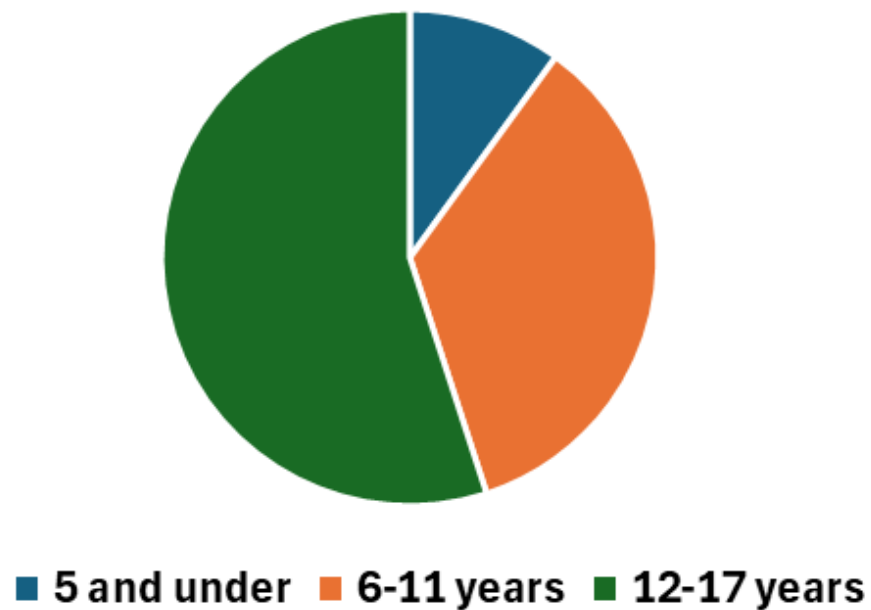


Grieving Overdose Loss

Parental Overdose as a Percent of Overall Parental Deaths: Michigan 2000-2022

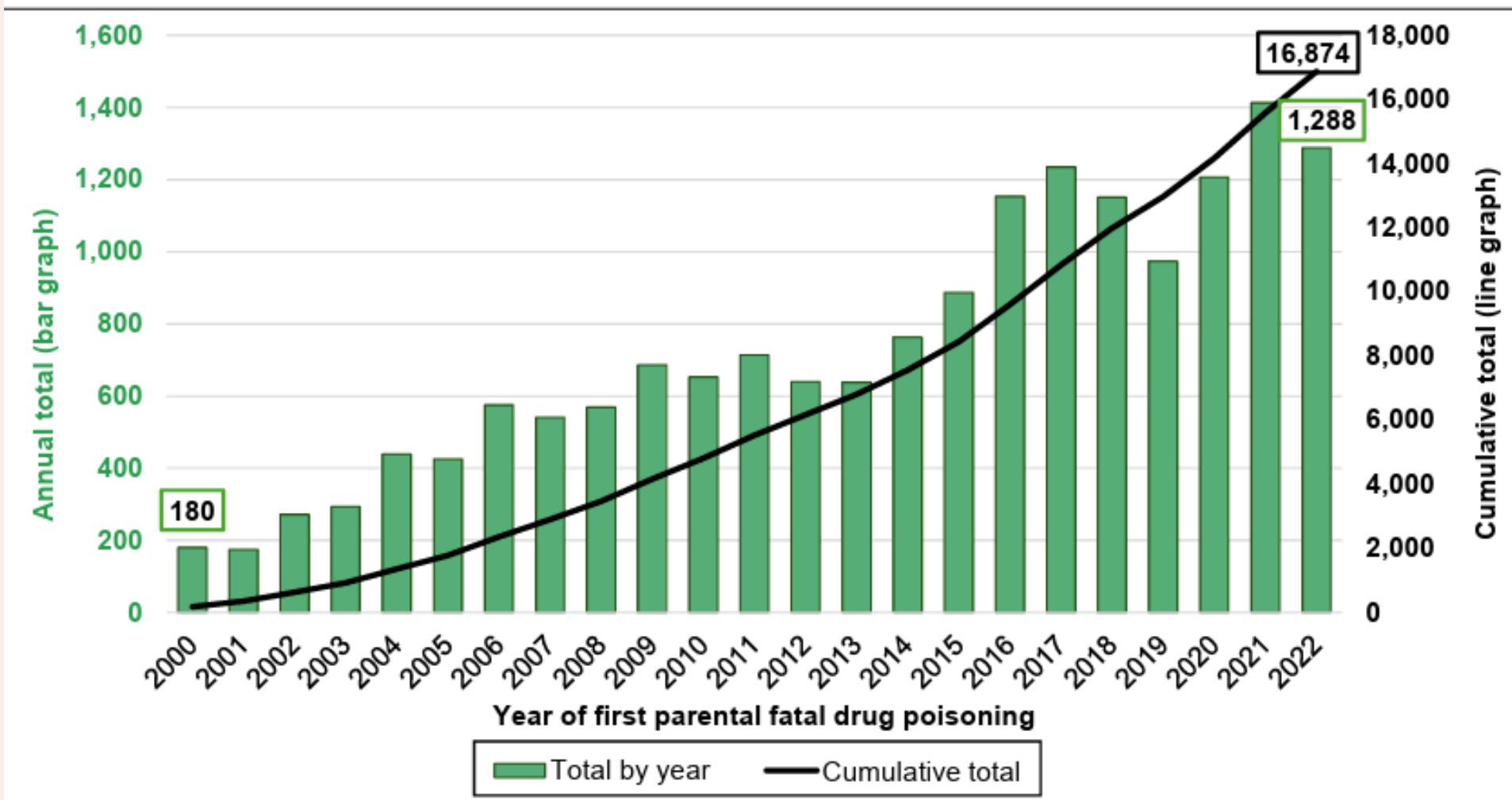


Ages of Parentally-Bereaved Children Due to Overdose



Source: Hulsey, E.G., Kcomt, L., McCabe, S.E. (Under review). A practical approach for states to estimate the number of children who experiencing parental drug overdose death.

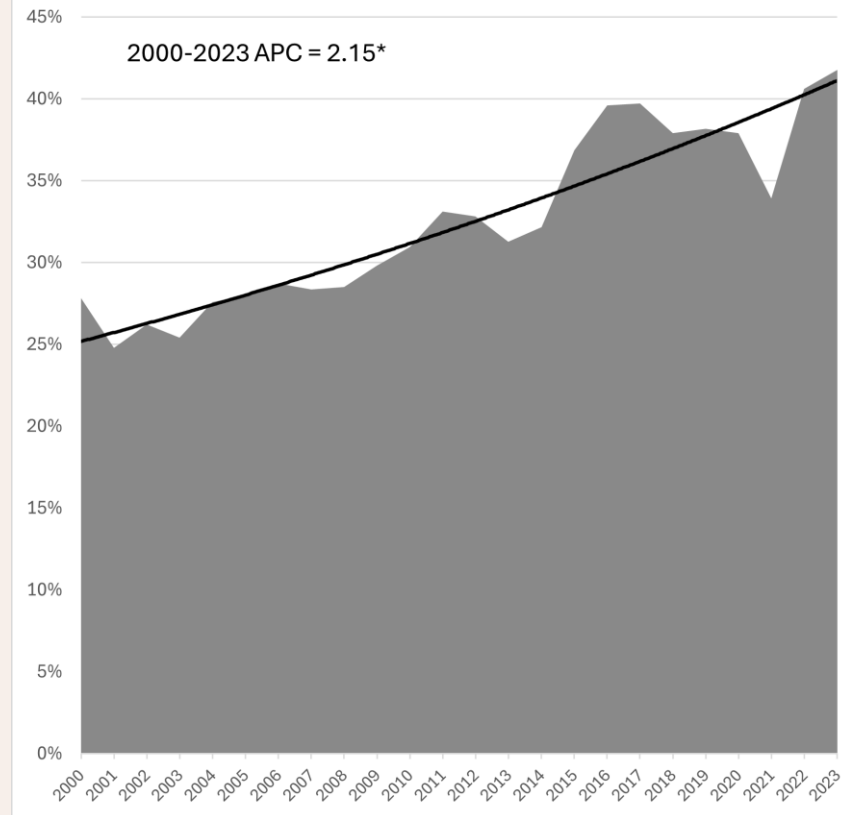
Figure 3. Annual and cumulative count of minor children whose parent(s) died due to drug poisoning by year parent died, Michigan, 2000-2022.



Source: <https://www.michigan.gov/opioids/-/media/Project/Websites/opioids/documents/Children-Whose-Parents-Died-Due-to-Drug-Poisoning.pdf?rev=907c5bf9f2e74e8e8e607cb04a34be0b>

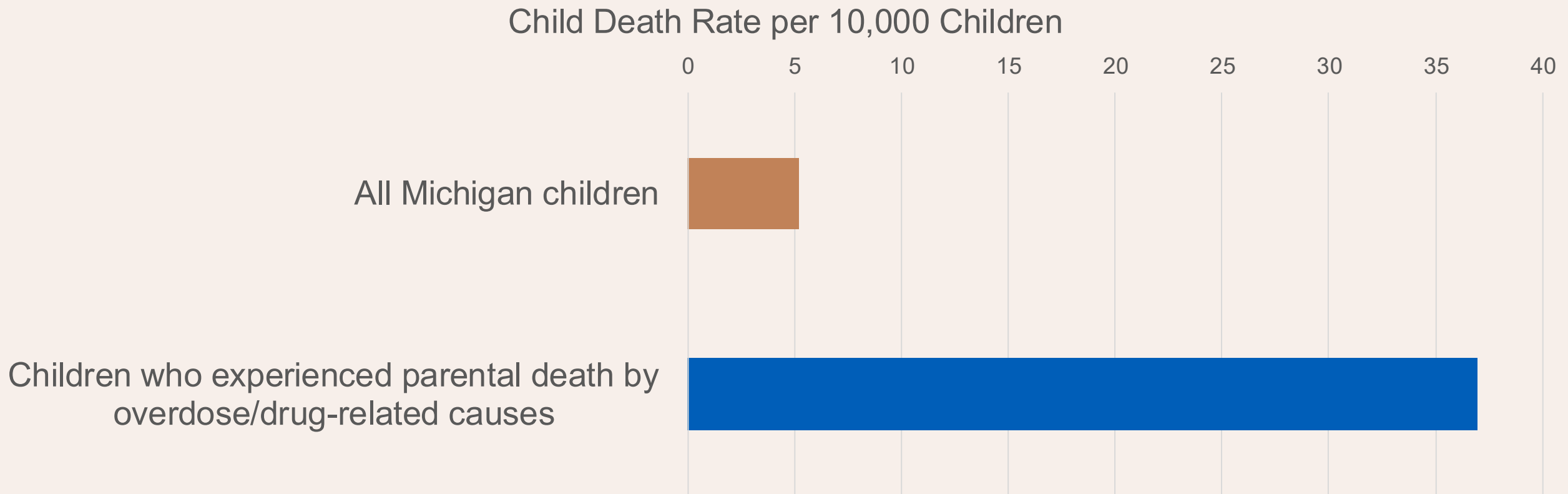


Figure 1. Statewide Percentage of Stigmatized Parental Deaths Relative to All-Cause Parental Deaths: Michigan 2000-2023



Source: McCabe, S. E., Hulsey, E., Kcomt, L., Evans-Polce, R. J., Radford, G., Tennant, S. D., & McCabe, V. V. (2025). Children’s experiences of parental deaths due to suicide, homicide, overdose, alcohol, or drug use. *JAMA Network Open*, 8(9), e2531231. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.31231>

Childhood mortality rate among children bereaved from parental death by drug overdose, 2009-2023



Source: McCabe, S.E., Kcomt, L., Evans-Polce, R.J., Radford, G., Tennant, S., Hulsey, E., McCabe, V.V., (Under review). Childhood mortality by parental cause of death, 2009-2023.

Addiction and the Family System

- Compromises daily functioning
- Financial, employment, housing instability
- Legal problems
- Family separation/dissolution
- Adverse childhood experience
- Child welfare involvement
- Anticipatory grief



Sources:

Dyregrov, K., Møgster, B., Løseth, H.-M., Lorås, L., & Titlestad, K. B. (2020). The special grief following drug related deaths. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 28(5), 415–424.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2019.1679122>

Dyregrov, K., & Selseng, L. B. (2022). “Nothing to mourn, he was just a drug addict”—Stigma towards people bereaved by drug-related death. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 30(1), 5–15.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2021.1912327>

Overdose Bereavement



- Stigma
- Disenfranchised grief
- Complex bereavement experience
- Communication about the death

“I think a lot of this deliberate avoidance is they don’t know how I would take it and they don’t want to make me cry.”

(Bereaved mother)

“I think it’s helpful to know other people are going through the same things or have been through the same things.”

(Bereaved sister)



Supporting Children & Families

Reduce stigma associated with addiction and overdose loss

- Raise awareness
- Education



Resources

- Sesame Street Workshop on [Parental Addiction](#)
- Evermore's [Community Guide for Grieving Parents, Caregivers, and Families](#)
- HopeHQ's online [Knowledge Center](#)

Macro

Mezzo

Micro

“Your loved one isn’t or wasn’t a bad person. They didn’t choose this. I think the more people can understand, again about addiction, about mental health, about the connection between the physical body and the emotional body, that it could be a comfort.”

(Bereaved daughter)

Identify geographic areas with unmet bereavement needs

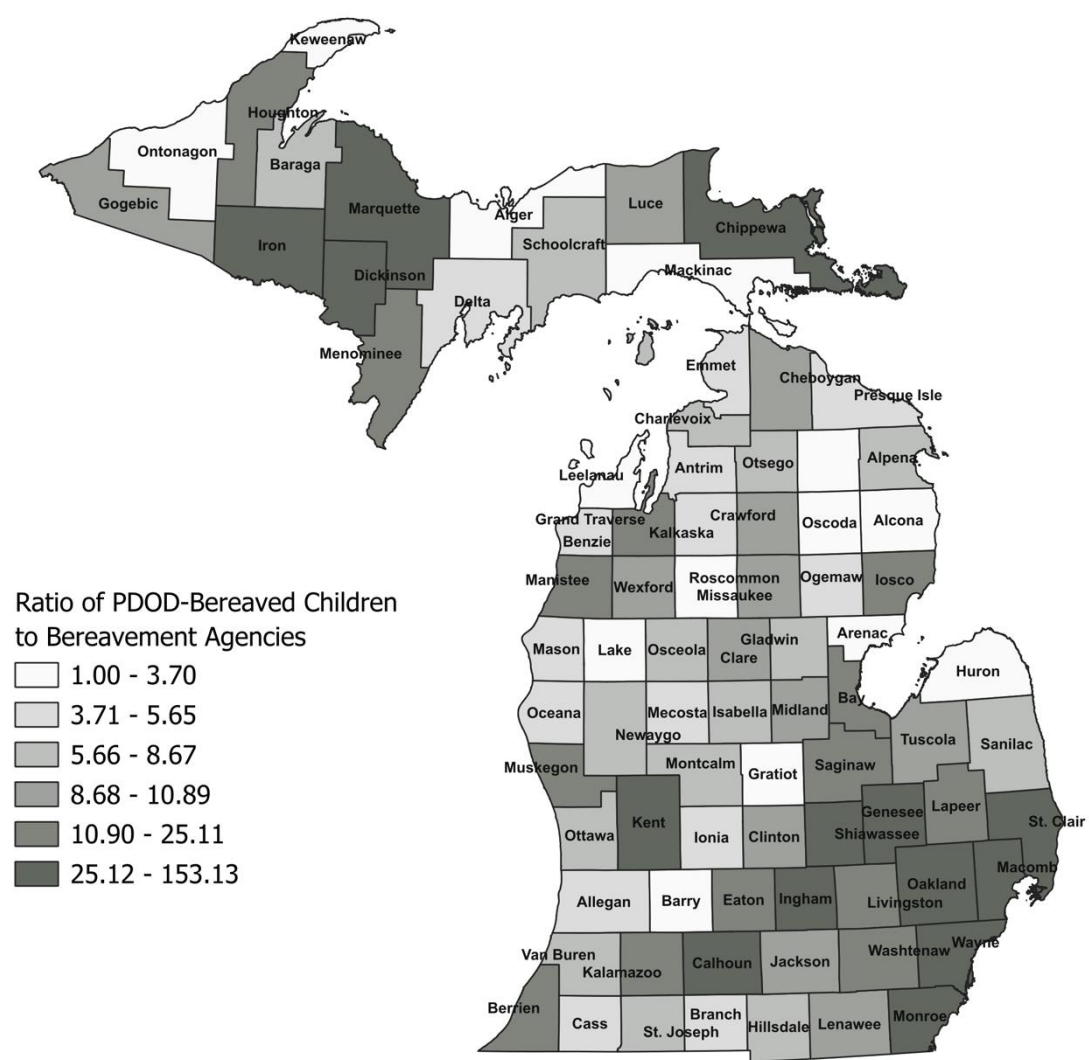
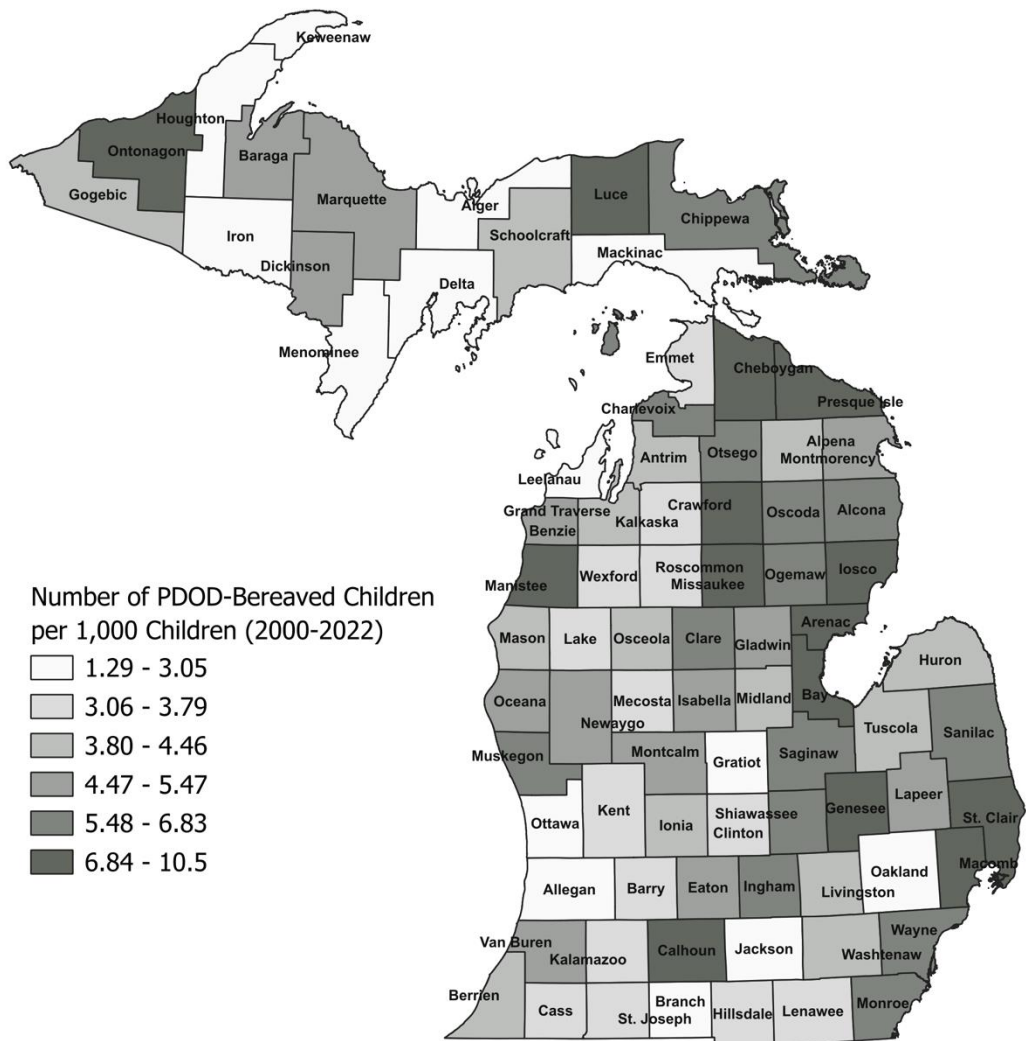
- Bereavement service deserts or under-resourced areas
- Inform resource allocation efforts
- Data-driven approach can be replicated in other states




Macro

Mezzo

Micro



MiSUD Locator



Substance Use Disorder Services & Licensed Programs

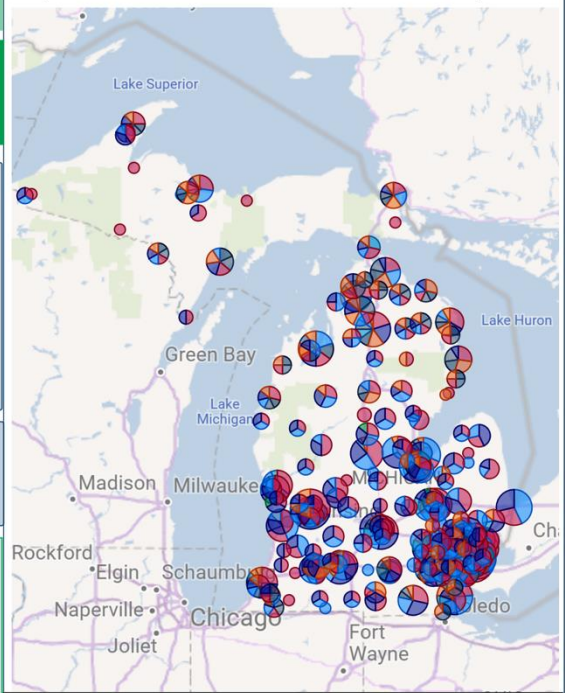
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In Crisis? Call or Text 988

MAT: Medication Assist Treatment

Facilities by Zipcode and Services

● Inpatient ● MAT-Bu... ● MAT-M... ● MAT-Nal... ● Outpati...



| Facility Name | Medicaid Accept | Street Address | City | Zip |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------------|-------|
| 1st Step Referral Services | | 2002 Hogback Rd | Ann Arbor | 48105 |
| 616 SUD Services | | 852 47th Street SW, Suite 8 | Wyoming | 49509 |
| A.C.T.S. South Flint Tabernacle | | G3450 S Saginaw St | Burton | 48529 |
| Abaris Behavioral Health - Novi | ✓ | 40000 Grand River Ave Ste 306 | Novi | 48375 |
| Abaris Behavioral Health - Rochester Hills | ✓ | 3950 S Rochester Rd Ste 2250 | Rochester Hills | 48307 |
| Abaris Behavioral Health - Shelby Twp | ✓ | 51221 Schoenherr Rd Ste 107 | Shelby Township | 48315 |
| Above the Water House | | 4105 Keyes St | Flint | 48504 |
| Abundant Community Recovery Services | | 1660 Oakman Blvd | Detroit | 48238 |
| Abundant Community Recovery Services (ACRS) - Outpatient Program (IOP) | | 13611 Dequindre St | Detroit | 48212 |
| Abundant Community Recovery Services (ACRS) - Recovery Support | | 1670 Oakman Blvd | Detroit | 48238 |
| ACAC - Muskegon North | | 1190 E Apple Ave | Muskegon | 49442 |
| ACAC - Muskegon South | | 1128 Roberts St | Muskegon | 49442 |
| ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) Human Services Center - Dearborn | ✓ | 6451 Schaefer Rd | Dearborn | 48126 |
| ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) Medical Center - Dearborn | ✓ | 6450 Maple St | Dearborn | 48126 |
| ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) Medical Center - Sterling Heights | ✓ | 4301 E 14 Mile Rd | Sterling Heights | 48310 |
| Access Behavioral Healthcare Associates | ✓ | 42189 E Ann Arbor Rd | Plymouth | 48170 |
| Achievement Center Treatment | | 930 E Drahnner Rd. | Oxford | 48371 |
| Addiction Solutions Counseling Center | | 218 S Washington St | Mt. Pleasant | 48858 |
| Addiction Treatment Services - Dakoske Hall | | 116 E Eighth St | Traverse City | 49684 |
| Addiction Treatment Services - Garfield Campus | ✓ | 1010 S Garfield Ave | Traverse City | 49686 |
| Addiction Treatment Services - U of M at Rachel Upjohn | ✓ | 4250 Plymouth Rd. | Ann Arbor | 48109 |
| Adolescent Addiction Recovery Center | | 350 W Big Beaver Rd | Troy | 48084 |
| Advanced Rapid Detox | | 23800 Orchard Lake Rd. Suite100 | Farmington | 48336 |

Grief Sensitivity in School Environment

Schools need to address how to

- Welcome the child back into the classroom
- Inform classmates about the death
- Teacher can support bereaved child
- Provide additional educational support
- Support the bereaved caregiver



Resource

New York Life Foundation's [Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative](#)

Macro

Mezzo

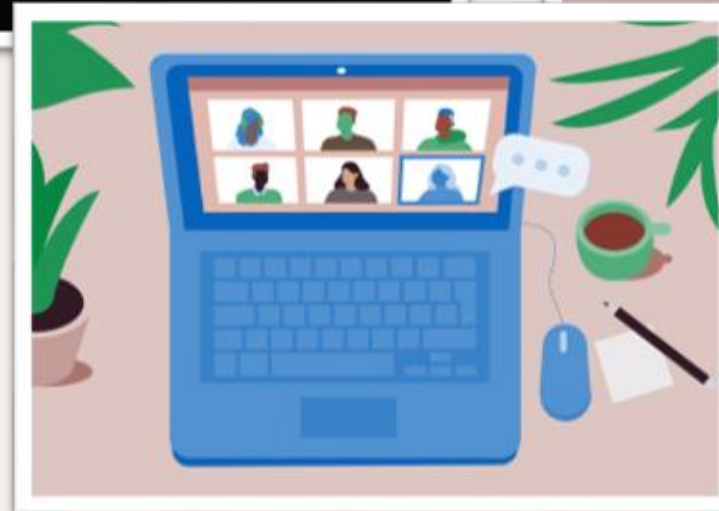
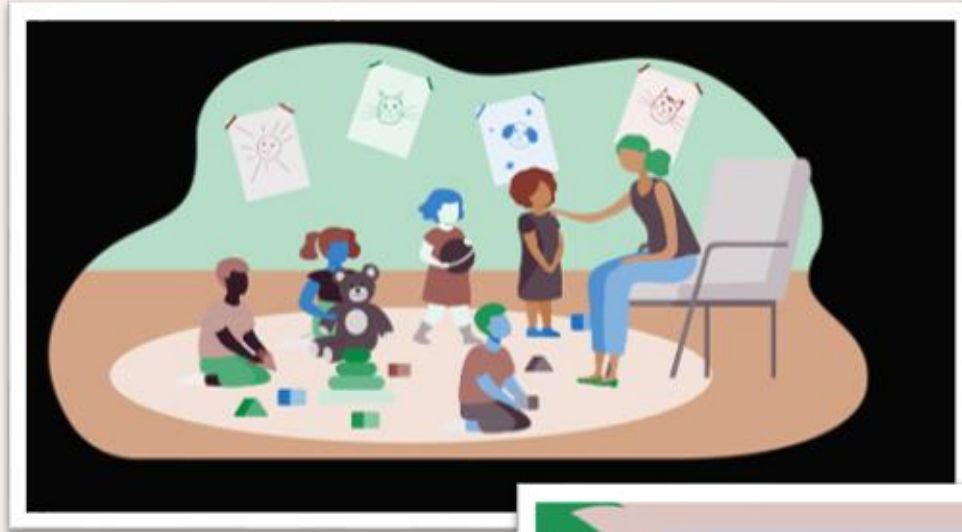
Micro

Bereavement support tailored to overdose loss

Macro

Mezzo

Micro



Macro

Mezzo

Micro

- Clinical assessment to determine diagnosis, functioning
- Use validated tools in assessment process
- Addressing the needs of the whole child
- Importance of play and creative expression
- Power of shared experiences through group support



Kaplow, J. B., Layne, C. M., Pynoos, R. S., & Saltzman, W. (2023). *Multidimensional grief therapy: A flexible approach to assessing and supporting bereaved youth*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316422359>

Weiskittle, R. E., & Gramling, S. E. (2018). The therapeutic effectiveness of using visual art modalities with the bereaved: A systematic review. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 11*, Article 9-24. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S131993>

Macro

Mezzo

Micro



“I think the most helpful thing is for people to not tell [me] that they understand, but to just say, ‘I’m here if you want to talk about it. I’m here, I will listen.’”

(Bereaved sister)

Macro

Mezzo

Micro

- Significant gaps remain in our understanding of interventions for children grieving parental drug overdoses.
- Limited funding and incomplete evaluations contribute to these gaps.
- A future webinar will explore the importance of utilizing and expanding these forms of interventions.





Institute for Research, Education
& Training in Addictions



Connect • Empower • Thrive



WAYNE STATE
School of Social Work

Next Steps

- Implications for practice, policy, and research
- Regional organizing to formulate a steering group, perform landscape analysis, and develop/disseminate resources
- Outreach with other states to promote similar assessments of children who have experienced parental loss to overdose
- Foster continued dialogue on this topic



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Contact Us



www.hope-hq.com



HopeHQ



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