

## Commentary

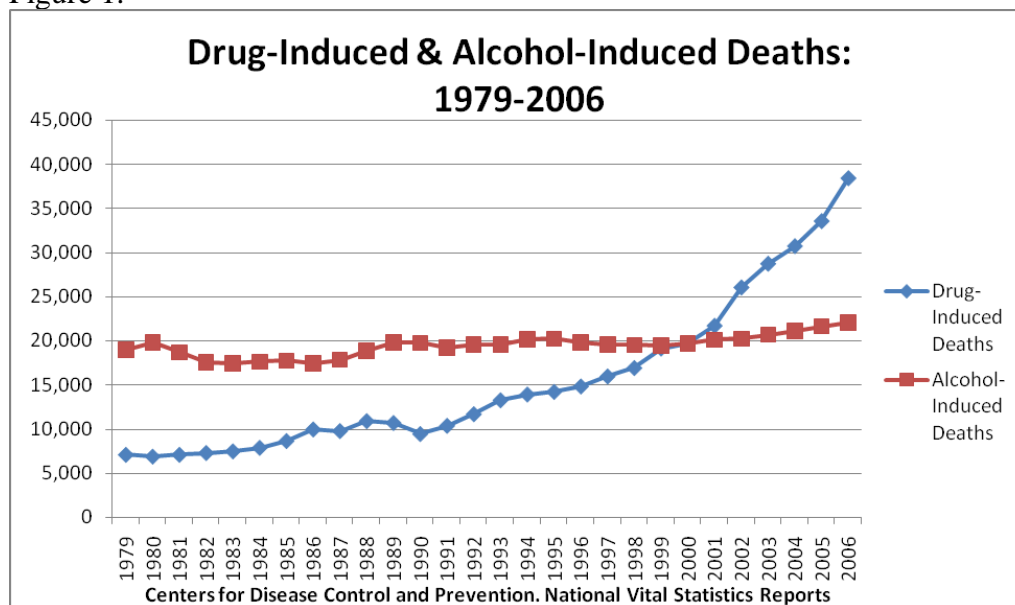
October 2, 2009

### *Drug Use Continues to be Significant Danger to Public Health; Overdose Deaths Outnumber Traffic Deaths in 16 States*

Drug use in the United States continues to be a significant threat to public health and public safety. A new report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) puts the enormity of drug deaths into perspective by comparing them to the widely appreciated number of traffic deaths each year. The report shows that more people have died from drug overdoses than traffic deaths in 16 states.<sup>1</sup> In 2006 the national number of overdose deaths grew to 39,000 while the number of traffic deaths decreased to 45,000. The national rate of traffic deaths fell 6.5% since 1999 while overdose deaths nearly doubled in that time.

For additional perspective, national rates of alcohol-induced deaths have continued to remain fairly stable since 1979 while overdose (or drug-induced) deaths have risen dramatically as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1.



The growing number of overdose deaths can be traced to a shift in types of drug use. While cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine contribute to the high number of overdoses, the largest increase is seen in the non-medical use of prescription drugs. Today, the number of overdose

deaths due to non-medical use of prescription opiates totals more than heroin and cocaine overdose deaths combined.

Unlike other drugs of abuse, there is no organized crime Mafia that control prescription drug use and no actively enforced prohibition against these drugs. This drug supply flows directly from legal prescriptions from physicians to patients at which point they are often diverted and/or directly misused and abused. Both the escalation and the size of the prescription drug abuse problem demonstrate that “legalization” is a false hope for reducing the high cost of drug abuse, since that it is based on the assumption that our drug problems are primarily caused by organized crime and prohibition.

The misuse of prescription drugs, especially opiates, needs to take a central focus in drug policy in the U.S. in the interest of improving public health and public safety. Reducing drug use through new, successful, and innovative strategies is the primary mission of the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) including working to reduce the non-medical use of prescription drugs.

One of IBH’s primary initiatives to address drug use is also connected to the large number of traffic deaths: to reduce drugged driving. Driving under the influence of drugs, including prescription drugs, is a growing and often overlooked problem in the U.S. and abroad. Conservative estimates show that 20% of crashes in the U.S. are caused by drugged driving. This translates into about 8,600 deaths, 580,000 injuries and \$33 billion in damages each year.<sup>2</sup> In a national survey, illegal drugs were present more than 7 times as frequently as alcohol among weekend nighttime drivers in the U.S., with 16% testing positive for drugs, compared to 2% testing at or above the legal limit for alcohol.<sup>3</sup> The dangers surrounding drug use, including the misuse of prescription drugs, extend beyond the risk of overdoses and into traffic deaths through drugged driving. The numbers of drug overdose deaths and traffic deaths are so high that they can no longer be ignored. Reducing drug use is a key strategy to decrease these remarkably high numbers of deaths.

For more information about IBH visit [www.ibhinc.org](http://www.ibhinc.org). For more information on drugged driving, visit [www.StopDruggedDriving.org](http://www.StopDruggedDriving.org).

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Stobbe, M. (2009, Oct. 1). In 16 states, drug deaths overtake traffic fatalities. Retrieved October 1, 2009 from [http://news.aol.com/article/cdc-drug-deaths-outpace-crashes-inmore/694553?icid=sphere\\_newsaoil\\_inpage](http://news.aol.com/article/cdc-drug-deaths-outpace-crashes-inmore/694553?icid=sphere_newsaoil_inpage)

<sup>2</sup> Conservative estimates based on:

- J.M. Walsh's finding that 50% of seriously injured drivers tested positive for drugs OTA (Walsh JM, Flegel R, et al Acc Anal Prev 37, 2005)
- Barry Logan's study showing 35% of fatally-injured drivers test positive for drugs (Schwilke, dos Santos, Logan, J For Sci, 2006)
- Barry Logan's trucker drug-testing study which found 21% of truckers test positive for drugs (Couper, Logan. J For Sci, 2001)
- CDC estimates that 18% of traffic accidents are drug-related (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/driving.htm>)
- NIDA estimates that drugs are used by 10% to 22% of drivers in collisions (<http://www.nida.nih.gov/infofacts/driving.html>)
- NHTSA notes that, for fatally injured drivers, cannabis is detected in 7% to 37% with a mean of 14%. Each of five other drugs can be found in about 5% or less (<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>)

<sup>3</sup> Richard Compton, & Amy Berning, Results of the 2007 National Survey of Alcohol and Drug Use By Drivers. National Highway Traffic Safety Facts. Washington, DC: NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis (July 2009) DOT HS 811 175