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Drug overdose deaths in Erie County have plummeted from 2023's peak

Sandra Tan 2 hrs ago 6



son Meurlin, a data analyst with Erie County Health's Harm Reduction Division, talks about new emerging trends with overdose death data. He's joined by Harm reduction Director Angela Dieter.

Amanda Stabler marvels that she's still alive. First hooked on drugs as a Lancaster High School student, she's since been homeless, slept under bridges, been rescued with Narcan over and over and relapsed after rehab stays.

"For some reason, I always woke up," she said of her 14 years wrestling with drug addiction. "I was the lucky one. I don't know why, but I have to make good use of the opportunity that I was given."



Amanda Stabler struggled with drug addiction for 14 years before getting clean. She plans to pursue a career in social work.

Libby March/Buffalo News

Clean for nearly three years now, Stabler has since graduated with an associate degree from SUNY Erie Community College and plans to pursue a social work career. She is also part of a growing number of people who are surviving drug addiction. And that may be due to more than just luck.

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While preventing overdose deaths remains a struggle, for the second year in a row, the number of deaths is falling. Last year, Erie County recorded its sharpest one-year decline in overdose deaths since the opioid crisis first unfolded a decade ago.

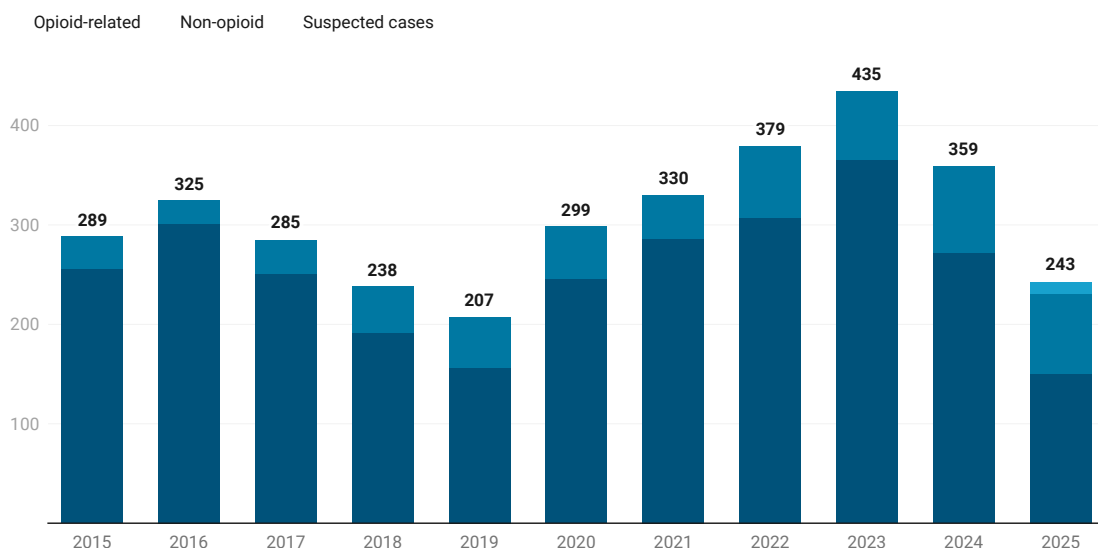
The latest numbers from the Erie County Health Department for last year show a one-third decline in all drug deaths – primarily due to the reduction of fentanyl-related fatalities.

The 33% decline is not just the largest percentage decrease in overdose deaths in a decade, but it represents the first time the county saw deaths fall by more than a hundred residents year over year. Health Department data shows a reduction of 116 deaths from 2024 to 2025.

"It was really like mid-2024 when deaths fell off a cliff," said Jason Meurlin, a data analyst for the county's Health Department and Division of Harm Reduction. "And then it was, OK, is this just a temporary phenomenon? Then it persisted into 2025."

Overdose drug deaths continue declining trend

This chart shows all overdose deaths in Erie County by year, including those that do not include opioids like fentanyl. After a five-year climb, overdose fatalities in 2025 showed the biggest one-year decline in overdose deaths since the crisis began.



Note: 2025 data includes 10 suspected but not confirmed overdose deaths as of 10/10/25

The bigger picture

These declining numbers over the last two years are not unique. They follow the **same downward trendlines** for New York State and for the nation. In both cases, 2023 represented a peak year for overdose drug deaths. Erie County reached its peak that year with 435 deaths.

Provisional data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, comparing September 2024 with September 2025, predicted an annual decline in U.S. drug deaths by 18.9% and an even steeper, predicted decline in New York of 35.4%.

No one cause has been cited, though experts following the issue have pointed to: increased disruption of the supply chains; a crackdown in supplying key ingredients needed to make synthetic opioids like fentanyl; changes in the makeup of what's being mixed into street drugs; wider availability of rescue drugs and treatment; and safer drug use habits by those still struggling with addiction.

Stabler had been addicted to Lortab; she also injected herself with opiates and turned to other stimulant street drugs and alcohol. But she did adopt certain harm-reduction practices. She didn't use opioids while she was alone, and would wake up from overdoses with friends, in ambulances and emergency rooms thanks to Narcan. She received methadone treatment and various other addiction treatment drugs. Eventually, she switched to other types of street drugs, like cocaine and other stimulants.

Stabler never stayed clean until she spent months watching her boyfriend lying in a hospital bed due to an addiction-related illness. Seeing how sick he was day in and day out made her commit to following a new path, giving up drugs and enrolling in college.

"It was quite traumatic," she said, "but that's how I got clean."



Amid rise in overdose deaths, Erie County launches \$1 million campaign to keep drug users alive

More county residents are dying of drug overdoses than ever, and more than half of them are cocaine users, so Erie County is launching a \$1 million public awareness campaign with new messaging.

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Harm reduction efforts

In Erie County, Harm Reduction Director Angela Dieter said that expanded outreach efforts, ongoing coordination and support from the county to community partners, and the widespread distribution of Narcan have also contributed to the decline in deaths.

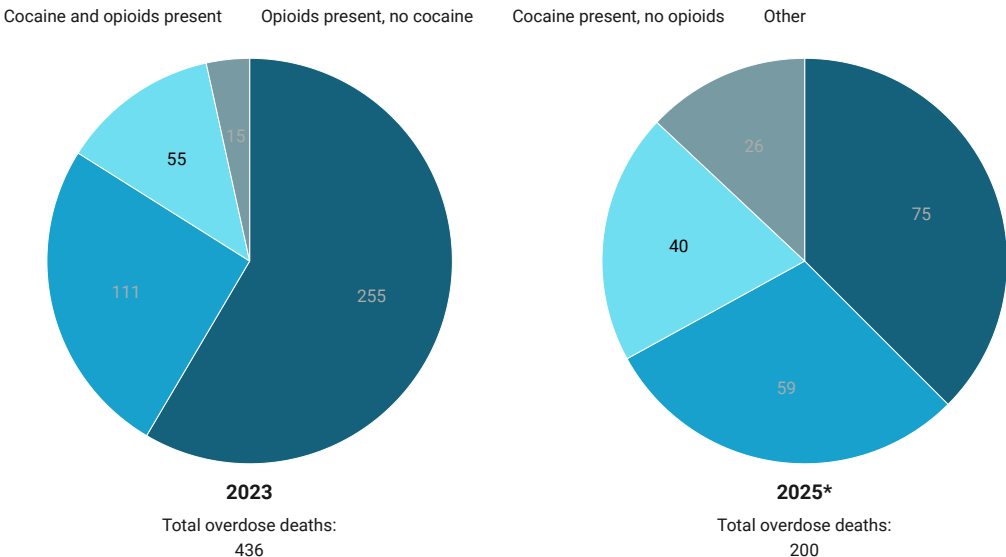
"Erie County really worked really hard at the education piece on harm reduction," she said, "and spreading that message, and making it acceptable and less stigmatizing across the board."

Meurlin pointed out some key changes over the past few years in regard to the local population of residents who are dying of drug overdoses and the types of drugs that are causing those deaths:

- While a disproportionate number of African American residents continue to die of drug overdoses, the racial disparity gap has been narrowing. White people continue to comprise the majority of overdose deaths, but drug fatalities involving those who are Black have fallen from 32% in 2023 – when deaths were at their highest – to 23% in 2025.
- The percentage of local residents dying from cocaine spiked with synthetic opioid drugs has declined sharply. Nearly 60% of overdose deaths were attributed to a cocaine/fentanyl drug mix in 2023, accounting for 255 lost lives in Erie County and sparking a **"Detect to Protect" cocaine awareness campaign** in 2024. In 2025, the percentage had dropped to 38%. Given the decline in deaths overall last year, the 38% of cocaine/fentanyl drug deaths accounted for 75 people.

Fewer drug deaths involve contaminated cocaine

In 2023, more people overdosed and died of cocaine mixed with opioids, like fentanyl, than all who died of any type of drug overdose in 2025. Moreover, the percentage of deaths due to a cocaine/opioid combination fell from 58% in 2023 to 38% last year.



* 2025 breakdown does not include 12 suspected overdose cases that have not yet been processed as of 2/18/26

Stabler said normalizing conversations about addiction and treatment is important. Harm reduction tools for protecting people addicted to drugs isn't different than seatbelts for drivers or washing hands when touching raw meat in the kitchen, she said. It all helps save lives.

"Everybody matters," she said. "People hear, 'Oh, somebody overdosed and, well, they shouldn't have been using drugs.' Well, it's not that simple. People don't wake up one morning and decide that they want to be a drug addict today."

Treatment and resources

Stabler said she's grateful for the treatment services and harm reduction tools that exist and wants more money from opioid settlement funds going to supporting those community needs. She also appreciates the availability of longer-acting addiction treatment medication, like buprenorphine injections that block both drug highs and withdrawal symptoms for a month.

What people struggling with addiction need is time, she said, and that's what these resources provide. Many of her former drug-using friends from her younger days have gotten clean. And Stabler is looking forward to attending school at SUNY Buffalo State this fall to complete a degree in social work.



Amanda Stabler, who struggled with drug addiction for 14 years before getting clean, stands in front of SUNY Erie Community College's downtown campus. She graduated with her mental health assistant associate degree in December.

She is also working with her doctor to lower her monthly injections of the addiction treatment drug Brixadi.

When her grandmother died a year ago, she worked through her grief without relapsing, a huge milestone.

"We are lowering my dose, but we are working on doing it slowly, you know?" she said. "Life is hard. I have all the faith in the world that I do not think I will ever touch another substance ever again. Like I said, if my grandmother passed away and I didn't get high, I can stay sober through anything. But the shot is there just in case."

She points to the availability of millions of dollars from drug companies to settle lawsuits related to the opioid drug crisis. That's a huge opportunity to do something good for the community, she said, supporting organizations doing "boots-on-the-ground" outreach and distribution of harm reduction and treatment support.

Erie County has so far received \$32.7 million in opioid settlement funds paid by drug companies and has spent about \$7 million of it, and has committed \$28.1 million.

That money has gone toward supporting staff positions in the departments of Social Services, Probation and Health, including the Health Department's Harm Reduction Division, according to the Health Department. It's also being spent on contracts with community agencies, the "Detect to Protect" media campaign, administration of settlement funds and to provide medication-assisted treatment for those in county jails with addiction disorders.

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By Sandra Tan

Reporter



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