

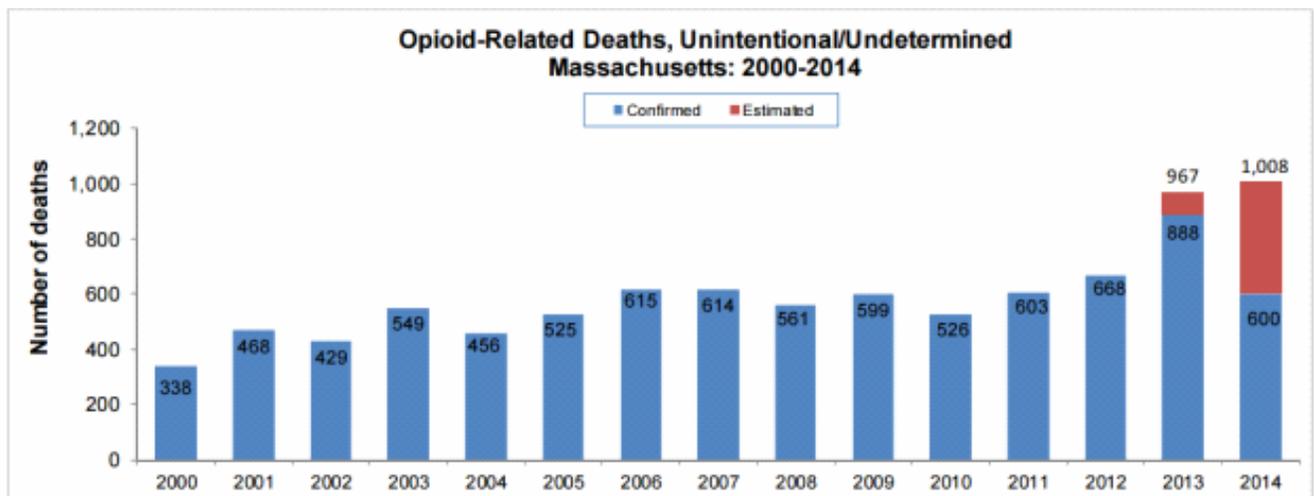
State: More Than 1,000 Died Of Opioid-Related Overdoses In 2014



BOSTON More than 1,000 people in Massachusetts died of opioid-related overdoses last year, according to an estimate made public by state health officials on Tuesday. That's a 33 percent jump over 2012 figures.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health says there were 600 confirmed opioid-related deaths in 2014, with an additional 408 overdose deaths estimated. (The department estimates the cause of death for cases not yet certified by the Office of the Medical Examiner.)

“The number of cases of unintentional overdose in 2014 represents a 33% increase over 2012 and a 3.3% increase over 2013,” the health department said in its data brief. There were 668 confirmed opioid-related deaths in 2012, and 888 last year — with an additional 79 estimated.



The state figures were first released in a Boston Globe op-ed by Gov. Charlie Baker, state Secretary of Health and Human Services Marylou Sudders and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Sylvia Burwell.

In the op-ed, the trio presented a “united front in the opioid battle” and said the “prescription opioid and heroin epidemic requires coordinated and comprehensive action from federal, state, and local leaders.”

The three leaders met in Boston Tuesday to discuss the issue.

The spike in opioid-related deaths can be viewed another way: In 2012, the state saw 10.1 opioid-related deaths per 100,000 residents; by the next year, that rate had jumped to 14.5 deaths per 100,000 residents.

The DPH data brief also broke down deaths by county. In 2014, Middlesex County had the most unintentional opioid overdose deaths, with an estimated 212, followed by Essex (146), Bristol (117) and Worcester (113) counties. Nantucket County had the fewest last year, with one death.

State police have said there were 217 suspected heroin overdoses in Massachusetts through the first three months of 2015, though that estimate does not include Boston, Worcester and Springfield.

At a press briefing Tuesday, Baker said four out of five heroin addicts began their opiate use with pain medications, many legally prescribed.

“While these are very important medications, and they do very important things — especially for people who are managing chronic pain, who have cancer and other illnesses like that — there are really significant issues associated with this,” he said.

A task force Baker created in February to combat prescription drug abuse is expected to release its recommendations in May.

By Benjamin Swasey