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GTA

# Toronto is seeing a drop in opioid overdose deaths. Here's why

The trend is believed to be the result of decreased potency in the supply of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, experts say.

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Mary Breen poses at her Toronto home. Breen lost her 27-year-old daughter, Sophie, to a fentanyl overdose in 2020.

Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star

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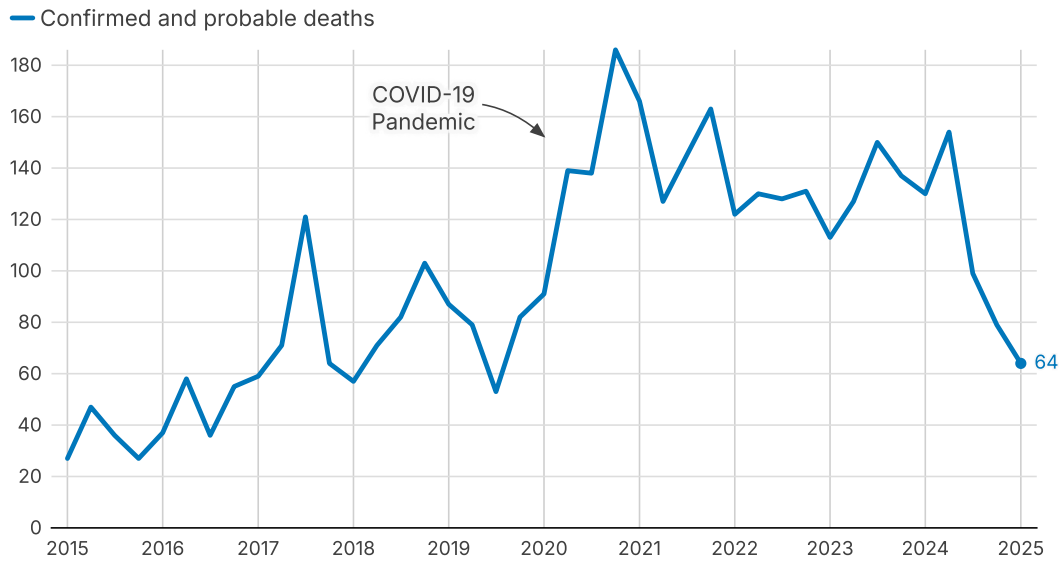
**By Omar Mosleh Staff Reporter**

Toronto is seeing a downward trend in opioid overdose deaths, new data from Toronto Public Health shows, although the number of people dying annually of drug toxicity is still much higher than pre-pandemic levels.

The trend is believed to be the result of decreased potency in the supply of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, experts say, while noting that the drug market is still volatile and could change course.

The Toronto Public Health numbers released Wednesday show there were 64 probable and confirmed overdose deaths in the first quarter of 2025, an 18 per cent decrease from the previous quarter and the lowest number since the third quarter of 2019. Emergency department visits due to opioid-related poisonings dropped significantly in the first quarter of 2025, with 160 visits compared to 425 in the previous quarter.

## Opioid deaths in Toronto falling



2023-2025 numbers are preliminary and subject to change

SOURCE: [TORONTO PUBLIC HEALTH](#)

TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Toronto saw a 12 per cent decrease in opioid overdose deaths in 2024 compared to 2023, from 527 deaths to 463. Nationally, opioid deaths decreased by 17 per cent year-to-year, although some jurisdictions such as Quebec and Newfoundland bucked the trend, according to data released by the Public Health Agency of Canada last week.

But the numbers don't capture the toll the opioid and drug-poisoning epidemic has taken on families, said Mary Breen, who lost her 27-year-old daughter, Sophie, to a fentanyl overdose in March 2020.

Even with the reduction seen nationwide in 2024, 7,146 Canadians died of opioid toxicity, or about 20 a day. Since 2016, 52,544 Canadians have died of opioid overdoses, not including figures from this year.

"That's a lot of people without siblings and aunts and uncles and so on ... It's going to be a multi-generational ripple effect of trauma," Breen said.

The decline in opioid overdose deaths is being observed across North America, with the United States reporting a nearly 27 per cent decrease in drug overdose deaths in 2024 compared to the previous year, according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some states have seen declines of 35 per cent or more.

"When we see continental trends ... This isn't because of any single regional, state or provincial policy that is being put in place," said Dan Werb, director of the Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation, which operates out of the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute at St. Michael's Hospital.

“When you start digging into the factor that really connects all these places, it’s the drug market,” he added, specifically pointing to the techniques and ingredients drug traffickers use to produce synthetic opioids.

In Toronto, the average concentration of fentanyl in a sample has decreased from four per cent in 2022 and 2023 to less than two per cent in 2025, according to Hayley Thompson with the Toronto Drug Checking Service.

But the market is so highly contaminated that relying solely on the amount of fentanyl in the sample is no longer sufficient, she added.

As of this month, more than 15 per cent of marketed fentanyl samples they checked didn’t contain any fentanyl. About half contained multiple high-potency opioids, while 80 per cent contained at least one other central nervous and/or respiratory system depressant, such as veterinary tranquilizers or benzodiazepines, which increase the risk of overdose.

Werb said while the relative reduction in fentanyl potency is encouraging, he added the volatility of the unregulated drug supply means “that could change in a minute”.

“Our approach to getting through this generation defining public health crisis (has been) to hope and pray that drug traffickers change their recipes,” he said, adding that current measures aren’t working.

Werb said traffickers are constantly “testing” new recipes to increase their bottom line.

“We see these really scary, ultra-potent drugs that every once in a while are introduced into the market. That’s a sign of, unfortunately, innovation in this market,” he said. “And that innovation can be deadly.”

Breen remembers her daughter Sophie as a tenacious, strong-willed and gifted student with a passion for helping others. She struggled with mental health challenges.

She tried many interventions to get better, including residential programs for addiction and mental health as well as Narcotics Anonymous.





Mary Breen lost her 27-year-old daughter Sophie to a fentanyl overdose in March, 2020. She remembers her as a tenacious, strong-willed and gifted student with a passion for helping others.

Mary Breen

Breen has created a documentary, featuring a series of animated shorts called “We Were Here,” that tells the story of people under 30 who died of opioid toxicity. The documentary is nominated for two awards at T.O. Webfest — best editing and best original score — and has been selected to screen at the Voices Rising Film Festival in New York.

Breen said she embarked on the project to help families highlight the lives of their loved ones, not how they died. Sophie’s segment is focused on her love for theatre and drama. While it pains Breen that her daughter is not around to see her own foray into film, she says she would have been proud.

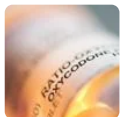
“I think she would have loved them,” she said. “Sometimes it’s really hard to go back to the before times and pull out the good stuff. And I really wanted to help people do that ... It’s helpful to remember that they were happy.”



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