

July 2026

The Deceleration That Refused to Die

By Lori Ann Post

A. Overdose deaths approached a return to growth - then reversed course.

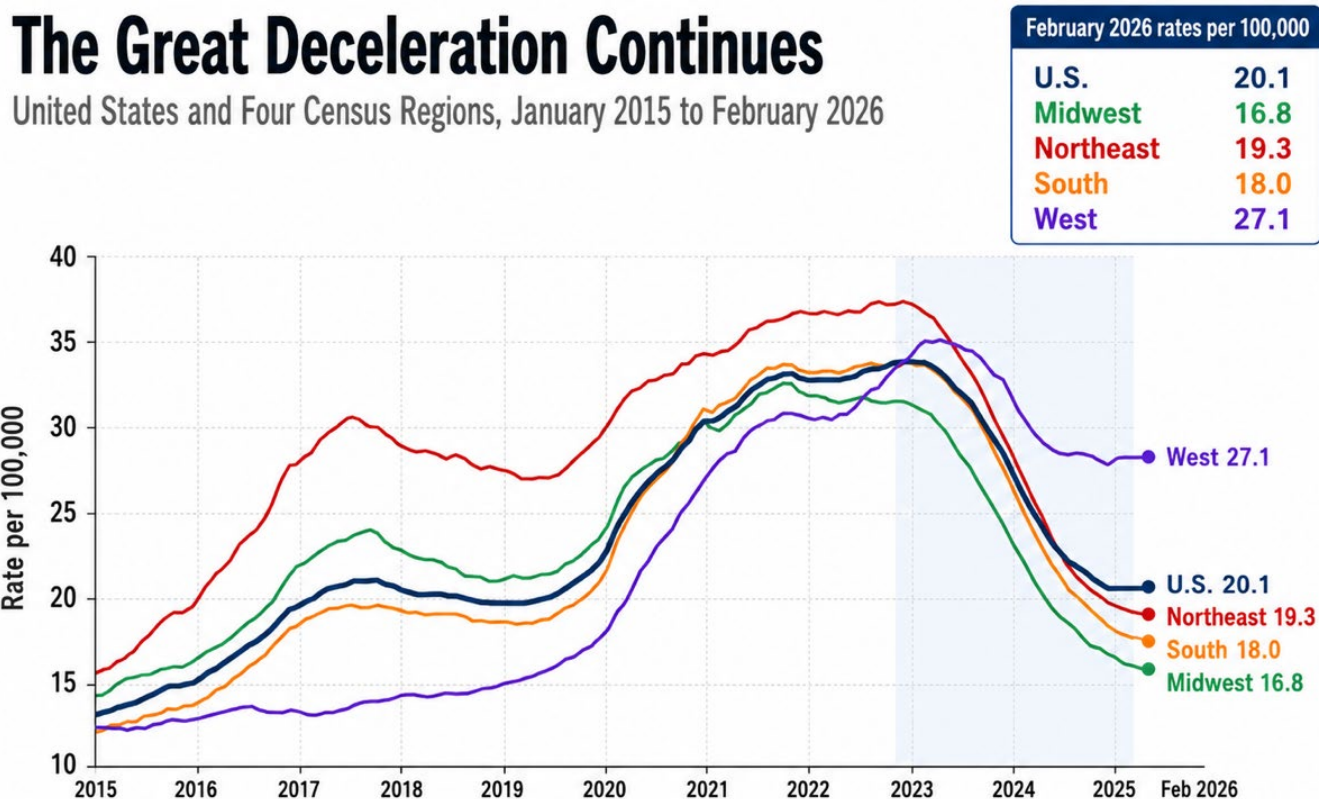
The United States recorded its **33rd consecutive month of declining drug overdose death rates** in February 2026 - - the longest sustained downturn since the modern overdose crisis began.

The national overdose death rate fell to **20.1 deaths per 100,000 population**, down from a peak of **33.7 in June 2023**. That is a major public health improvement. In fact, we are now roughly back to where we were in **December 2016**, when the overdose death rate was **20.0**.

That perspective matters. When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid crisis a **Public Health Emergency in October 2017**, the overdose death rate was **21.9**.

The Great Deceleration Continues

United States and Four Census Regions, January 2015 to February 2026



The national rate continued to decline through February 2026.
The West remained highest.

Source: CDC NVSS UCD predicted values. Rates shown as 12-month moving estimates.

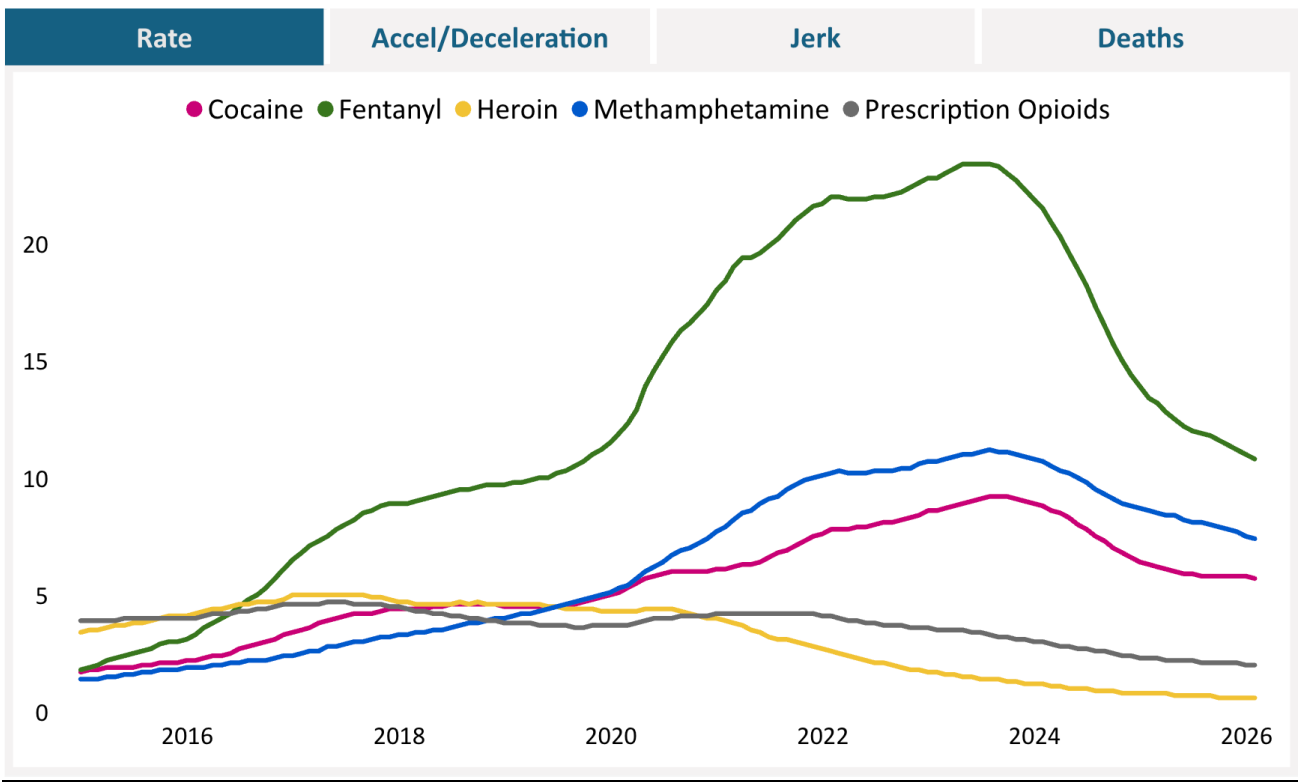
Today's rate is lower than it was when the emergency was declared.

But lower does not mean low. The country has made extraordinary progress from the peak, yet we remain in territory once considered catastrophic.

B. Below Zero: Tracking the Great Deceleration

The first figure shows overdose death rates by drug type. By **2017**, fentanyl had overtaken cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and prescription opioids. Since **2021**, the rank order has held: **fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, prescription opioids, and heroin**. The pace has slowed while the rank held.

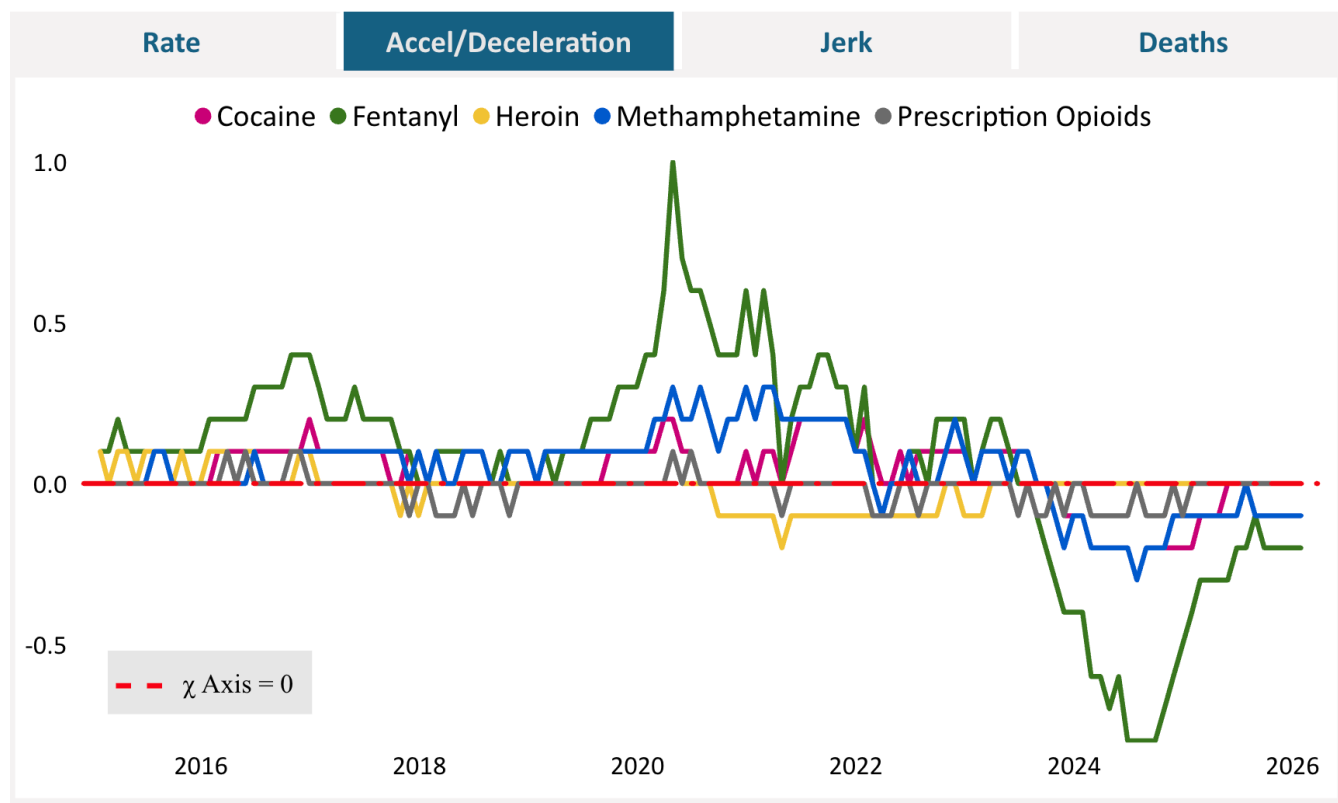
But during the **Great Deceleration**, rank alone is not enough. We also need to track how quickly deaths involving each drug are rising or falling. That is what acceleration and deceleration rates show.



The second figure plots each drug against the **zero-growth line**. Heroin and prescription opioids began contracting around 2018 as fentanyl displaced them. By **August 2023**, all five drug categories had fallen below zero.

Fentanyl reached its **maximum acceleration in May 2020** and its **maximum deceleration in July 2024**. Stimulants followed the same pattern, but less dramatically. After July 2024, deceleration weakened and appeared headed back toward growth. Then, from **August 2025 through February 2026**, it strengthened again.

A cautionary note: this renewed decline should not be credited to the bombing of suspected drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean. Those vessels were reportedly carrying **cocaine**, yet cocaine deaths had already flattened near zero growth. The timing points to a broader **secular trend**, not a new supply shock.



C. National Decline. Uneven State Trajectories.

National and regional overdose trends continue to decline, but the picture varies widely across states.

As of **February 2026**, **nine states were in positive growth**, down from 14 the previous month: **Colorado, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming**. In these states, monthly overdose deaths were increasing rather than declining.

Six states—**Louisiana, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia**—shifted from decline to growth. These were not gradual changes. They were **reversals**.

Three states—**Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming**—recorded growth for two consecutive months, suggesting a more persistent trajectory.

Meanwhile, five states moved in the opposite direction. **Hawaii, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, and South Dakota** shifted from growth back into decline. On paper, that is progress: fewer states are now moving in the wrong direction.

Watch the Movement, Not the Rank

New Mexico currently has the nation's highest overdose death rate. But rankings miss the larger point. There are **no winners or losers**, and the top spot rarely stays fixed for long.

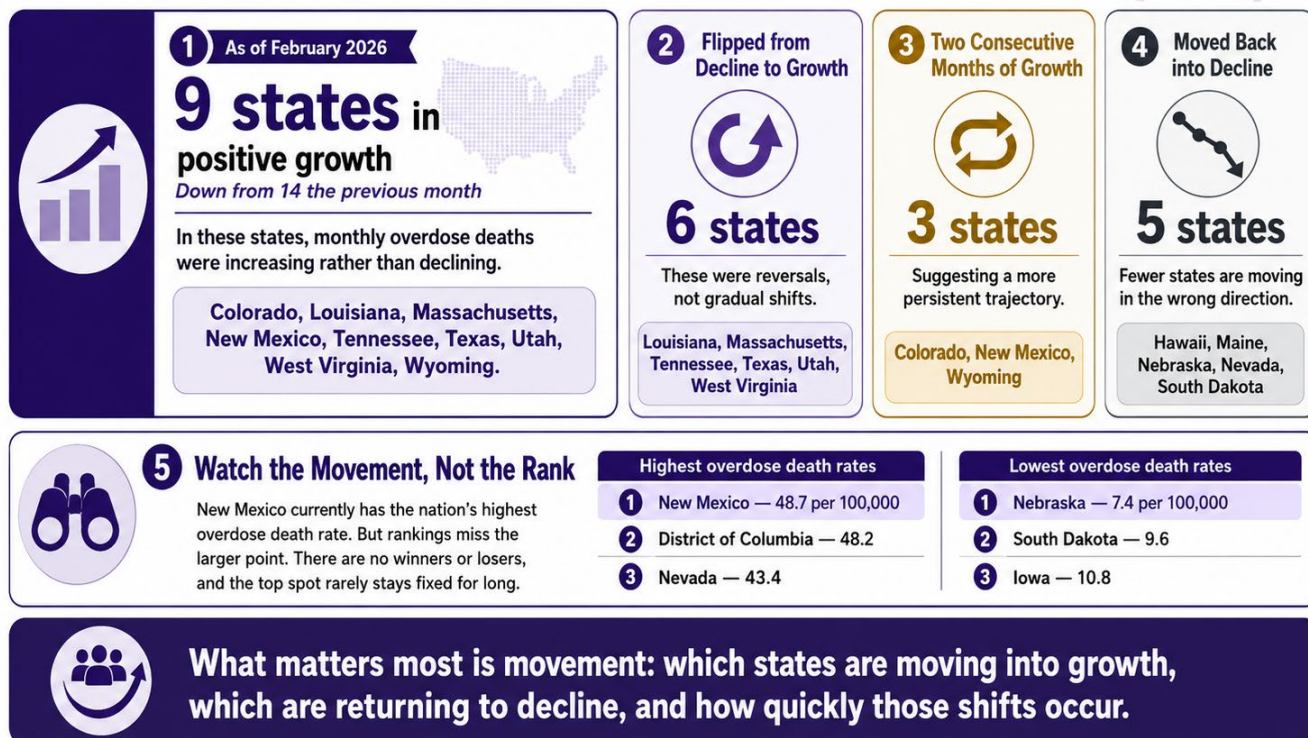
Highest overdose death rates: As of February 2026, New Mexico (**48.7 per 100,000 population**), the District of Columbia (**48.2**), and Nevada (**43.4**) had the highest rates in the nation.

Lowest overdose death rates: Nebraska (**7.4 per 100,000 population**), South Dakota (**9.6**), and Iowa (**10.8**) had the lowest rates.

These rankings are only a snapshot. What matters most is **which states are moving into growth, which are returning to decline, and how quickly those shifts occur.**

One Nation. Fifty Different Overdose Crises

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D. Lag Time in Reporting

There is a 4-to-5-month lag because overdose deaths must first be investigated and certified by medical examiners, confirmed through toxicology testing, reported through

local and state health departments, and then finalized in the national vital statistics system. Data released today on *July 15, 2026*, are only current through February 2026 due to the 4.5 lag time between death and reporting.