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2015 sees highest number of drug misuse deaths on record in England and Wales, underscoring failings of government drug policy

Heroin and/or morphine deaths more than doubled since 2012

LONDON (September 9, 2016) – Office for National Statistics (ONS) data released today shows 2,479 drug misuse deaths registered in 2015 in England and Wales, a 10 per cent increase on 2014 figures. It is the third year in a row that the ONS has registered an increase and means 2015 is now the year with the highest registered deaths since records began.

Heroin and/or morphine deaths accounted for the majority of drug misuse deaths, rising to 1,201 registered. These deaths have more than doubled since 2012 when 579 were registered.

Release’s executive director, Niamh Eastwood, says:

“The shocking rise in drug misuse deaths for the third year running raises serious concerns about the government’s drug policy and the state of the drug treatment sector in this country. Since 2010, we have seen a worrying implementation of abstinence-based treatment under the government’s ideologically-driven ‘recovery’ agenda. This goes against all the evidence for best practice in drug treatment, and is contributing, we believe, to this shameful rise in deaths. Such a hostile environment means people simply don’t want to access treatment.

For example, Release has handled an increasing number of cases in recent years whereby people are being forced to reduce their opioid substitution therapy (OST) prescriptions, or indeed have had them removed altogether. This is despite OST being well-evidenced in providing stability to people’s lives and it being a vital component of treating opioid dependence. Rapidly removing OST for those who need it can force people back to the black market and significantly increase the risk of death.

Combined with the push for people to be ‘drug-free’, there has been a worrying cut in funding to community and treatment services nationally, which has impacted on the level of care being offered to an extremely vulnerable and marginalized group. There is an increasing tendency among local authorities to simply offer treatment contracts to providers who can deliver the service for the lowest cost. The standard of healthcare is being overlooked for purely financial reasons.

The Home Office’s pursuit of a ‘tough on drugs’ strategy and refusal to acknowledge the evidence for best practice in drug treatment is quite literally killing people.”

Notes to the editor

1. [Release](#) is the UK national centre of expertise on drugs and drug laws, providing free and confidential specialist services to professionals, the public, and people who use drugs. Release also campaigns for the reform of UK drug policy, particularly the removal of criminal sanctions for possession offences, in order to bring about a fairer and more compassionate legal framework to managing drug use in our society.
2. Latest drug misuse deaths figures from the ONS can be found [here](#). Figures from 2014 are [here](#), and 2013 [here](#).