Austin

MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and City Council

Through: Stephanie Hayden-Howard, LMSW, Assistant City Manager

From: Desmar Walkes MD, Austin-Travis County Health Authority
Austin Public Health Medical Director

Adrienne Sturrup, Austin Public Health Director CDeLeon on behalf of Director

Date: October 26, 2026

Subject: **Opioid Overdose Prevention Progress and Emerging Public Health Risks in Travis County**

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update on progress in reducing opioid-related deaths in Travis County, to identify emerging drug poisoning risks, and to highlight Austin Public Health's investments in clinical education, substance use treatment, harm reduction, and community-based prevention activities.

PROGRESS IN REDUCING OPOID-RELATED DEATHS

The Austin-Travis County area has made significant progress in addressing the opioid overdose crisis, including a **35% reduction in opioid-related deaths**. This achievement reflects the collective efforts of public health, emergency medical services, healthcare providers, law enforcement, and community organizations.

The emergency declaration issued under City Council leadership was instrumental in mobilizing resources, securing funding, and establishing the partnerships necessary to implement targeted interventions. These efforts have strengthened APH's ability to identify populations at risk, expand overdose prevention activities, and respond to emerging threats.

The collaborative response has been documented in the Opioid Overdose Prevention Story Map presented at the 2026 Esri Global Conference. Selected slides in the attachment illustrate how surveillance, targeted interventions, and community partnerships have supported efforts to reduce opioid-related deaths.

ON-GOING CHALLENGES AND EMERGING DRUG POISONING RISKS

Despite the decline in opioid-related deaths, Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services

(A-TCEMS) data continues to demonstrate consistently high numbers of drug poisoning incidents, including those associated with the ingestion of unknown opioids. These trends indicate that the risk of overdose remains substantial and that continued prevention and surveillance are essential.

The evolving drug supply presents additional challenges. Increasingly potent synthetic opioids and the potential presence of unexpected substances in illicit drugs create significant risks for individuals who may be unaware of what they are ingesting.

Austin Public Health continues to monitor local A-TCEMS data and reports from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to identify emerging threats and inform timely public health communications.

Emerging Concern: Kratom and 7-Hydroxymitragynine (7-OH)

The availability of products containing 7-hydroxymitragynine (7-OH), a potent opioid-like compound associated with kratom, is an emerging public health concern. These products are sometimes referred to as "gas station opioids" because they are available at convenience stores, gas stations, smoke shops, and online retailers.

Kratom is derived from a tropical tree native to Southeast Asia and is sometimes marketed as a natural remedy for pain, anxiety, or opioid withdrawal. Concentrated 7-OH products may be chemically manufactured or enhanced to produce stronger opioid-like effects.

Laboratory studies suggest that 7-OH may be substantially more potent than morphine under certain experimental conditions, although these findings do not directly establish equivalent potency in humans. Concentrated 7-OH products can cause dependence, serious health complications, and potentially life-threatening overdoses, particularly when combined with alcohol, opioids, or other drugs.

Of particular concern is the marketing of these products in forms such as gummies, candies, liquids, and snack-like products that may appear harmless. Their presentation can obscure potential health risks and increase the likelihood of accidental ingestion by children.

LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY CONSIDERATIONS

Current Protections. Texas Health and Safety Code, Chapter 445, establishes consumer protections governing the manufacture, distribution, and sale of kratom products. The law requires product labeling with safe-use directions and recommended serving sizes, prohibits the sale of kratom products to individuals younger than 18, and restricts products containing synthetic alkaloids, including synthetic 7-OH. It also prohibits kratom products in which 7-OH exceeds 2% of the total alkaloid composition.

These statutory protections provide an important framework for consumer safety. However, the availability of concentrated 7-OH products, including products marketed as gummies, liquids, and snacks, continues to raise public health concerns. Ongoing surveillance, consumer education, and attention to compliance with existing regulations remain essential to reducing accidental exposures, dependence, and overdoses.

New Federal Action – October 2026. On October 9, 2026, the U.S. Department of Justice announced updated emergency scheduling actions targeting 7-OH and three related potent opioid substances: mitragynine pseudoindoxyl (MGPI), MGM-15, and MGM-16.

Based on updated scientific information and recommendations from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the DEA issued new notices of intent concerning Schedule I controls for these substances.

For 7-OH, and MGPI, HHS recommended Schedule I control when either substance, or their combined amount, exceeds 1 milligram per gram in solid products or 1 milligram per milliliter in liquid products, or when the ratio of mitragynine to 7-OH, MGPI, or their combined amount is less than 100 to 1. This approach is intended to distinguish products containing naturally occurring trace amounts of these substances from products that have been intentionally concentrated or chemically enhanced.

MGM-15, MGM-16, and MGPI were temporarily placed in Schedule I in August 2026. The October action maintains the existing controls while the DEA proceeds with updated scheduling notices. As of October 23, 2026, the DEA had not issued a temporary scheduling order for 7-OH.

These federal developments reinforce concerns about the availability of concentrated 7-OH products and the importance of distinguishing botanical kratom from enhanced products containing potent opioid substances.

The combination of existing Texas consumer protections and evolving federal regulatory action underscores the importance of continued surveillance, public education, and coordination with regulatory and law enforcement partners.

AUSTIN PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE AND INVESTMENTS

Austin Public Health has supported a comprehensive approach to opioid overdose prevention that includes surveillance, healthcare provider education, community outreach, and partnerships with organizations delivering harm reduction services.

Clinical Education and Healthcare Provider Outreach. APH provided funding to develop continuing medical education (CME) opportunities for physicians and other healthcare professionals focused on substance use disorders and evidence-based treatment. These educational activities are intended to strengthen clinical knowledge, improve recognition and management of substance use disorders, and support appropriate treatment and referral practices.

APH has also supported outreach to the medical community through medical detailing, an evidence-based educational approach that provides healthcare professionals with targeted clinical information and practical tools. These efforts help increase awareness of treatment options, promote evidence-based prescribing and management practices, and strengthen connections between clinical care and community-based substance use treatment resources.

Engaging healthcare providers is an essential component of overdose prevention. Improving clinical knowledge and facilitating access to treatment can help identify individuals at risk earlier, reduce barriers to care, and support long-term recovery.

Support for Harm Reduction Partners. APH has also supported community-based harm reduction partners whose work is critical to reaching individuals at greatest risk of overdose, including those who may not be connected to traditional healthcare services. These partnerships support overdose prevention education, access to lifesaving resources such as naloxone, connections to substance use treatment and recovery services, and engagement with individuals who use drugs.

Harm reduction organizations play an important role in building trust, identifying emerging risks in the drug supply, and connecting individuals with healthcare and social services. Their direct engagement with affected populations also provides valuable insights that can inform public health messaging and targeted interventions. Continued collaboration with these partners is essential to maintaining access to prevention resources and reducing preventable deaths.

Surveillance and Public Education. APH continues to monitor EMS drug poisoning reports and DEA information to identify emerging substances, overdose patterns, and potential threats.

Public health communications include social media messaging and advisories addressing synthetic opioids and concentrated 7-OH products. These messages emphasize the importance of reading product labels, avoiding combinations of substances that increase overdose risk, keeping products away from children, and recognizing the signs of an overdose.

APH also reinforces the importance of immediate emergency medical assistance when an overdose is suspected and administration of naloxone when available. Individuals experiencing adverse effects after using kratom or 7-OH products should contact their healthcare provider or the Texas Poison Center Network at 1-800-222-1222.

Priorities for Continued Collaboration. The progress achieved in the Austin-Travis County area demonstrates the importance of sustained investment in a comprehensive public health response that integrates prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and surveillance.

Moving forward, priority areas include strengthening real-time drug poisoning surveillance, expanding clinical education and medical detailing, supporting community-based harm reduction organizations, increasing connections to evidence-based substance use treatment, and evaluating the impact of these interventions on overdose-related morbidity and mortality.

Continued collaboration among Travis County, Austin Public Health, A-TCEMS, healthcare providers, law enforcement, and community partners will be essential to sustaining progress and responding to emerging threats.

CONCLUSION

The 35% reduction in opioid-related deaths represents an important public health achievement and demonstrates the value of the investments and partnerships made possible through the opioid emergency declaration. APH's investments in continuing medical education, medical detailing, and support for harm reduction partners have contributed to a broader community response that addresses both the immediate risk of overdose and the underlying need for access to evidence-based substance use treatment.

However, persistently high numbers of drug poisoning incidents and the emergence of concentrated 7-OH products underscore the need for continued vigilance and coordinated action.

Austin Public Health remains committed to working with Travis County and our community partners to sustain progress, strengthen access to treatment and prevention resources, and further reduce preventable overdose deaths.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact Desmar Walkes MD, Austin-Travis County Health Authority, Medical Director of Austin Public Health at Desmar.Walkes@austintexas.gov.

cc: T.C. Broadnax, City Manager
Erika Brady, City Clerk
Jason Hadavi, City Auditor
Mary Jane Grubb, Municipal Court Clerk
Judge Sherry Statman, Municipal Court
CMO Executive Team
Department Directors

Attachment: Opioid Overdose Prevention Story Map – Selected Slides from the 2026 Esri Global Conference

Pathway to Reduced Overdose Deaths

How Austin –Travis County used data, partnerships, and innovation to change the trajectory of the opioid epidemic.

Desmar Walkes, MD

Austin-Travis County Health Authority -
APH Medical Director

The Shaping of a Crisis

Every overdose death represents a life lost, a family forever changed, and a community left searching for answers. This StoryMap explores how Austin–Travis County utilizes data, geography, and partnerships to change that trajectory



iStock-1067543676

The Shaping of a Crisis

The rise of overdose-related deaths in Austin - Travis County

In 2018, opioid overdose deaths were rising rapidly in Austin–Travis County, reflecting a growing national crisis. Recognizing the urgency, Austin City Council declared opioid misuse a public health priority and initiated a coordinated, community-wide response.

What followed was a shift from reacting to overdoses to preventing them through data, collaboration, and evidence-based public health action.

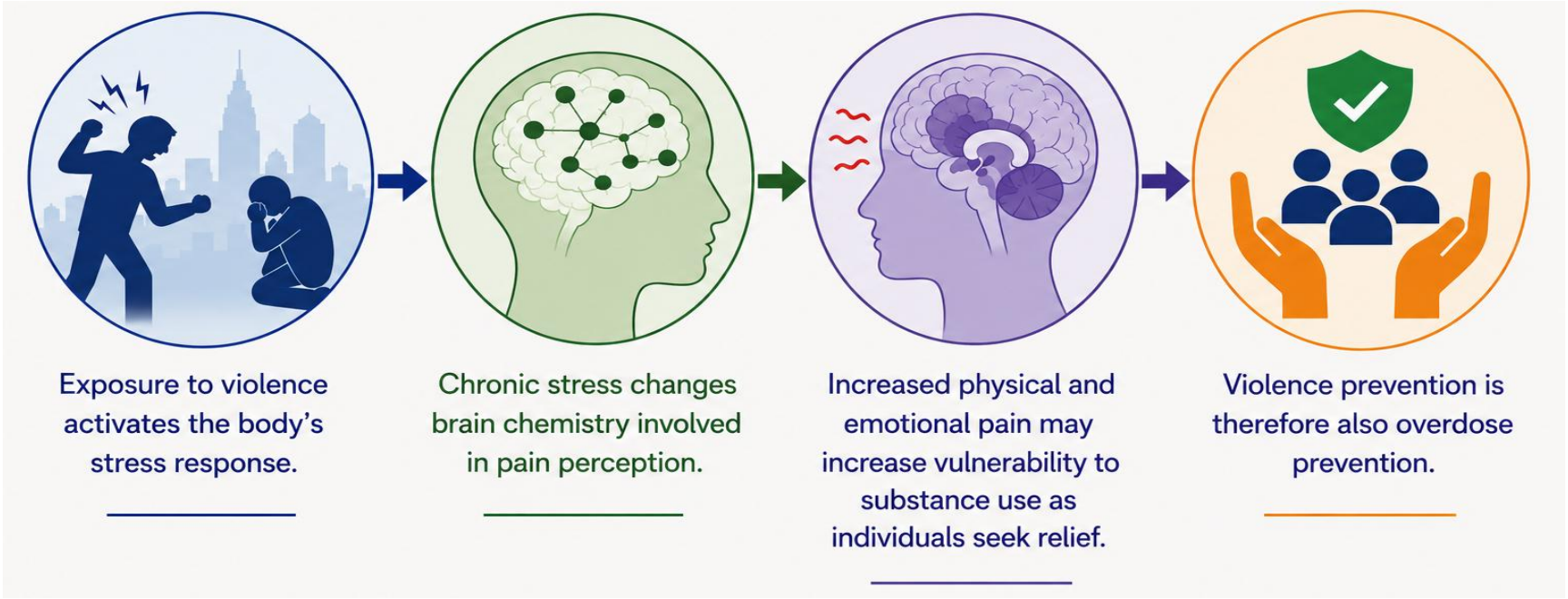
Why Social Conditions Matter

Social Determinants Create Biological Stress

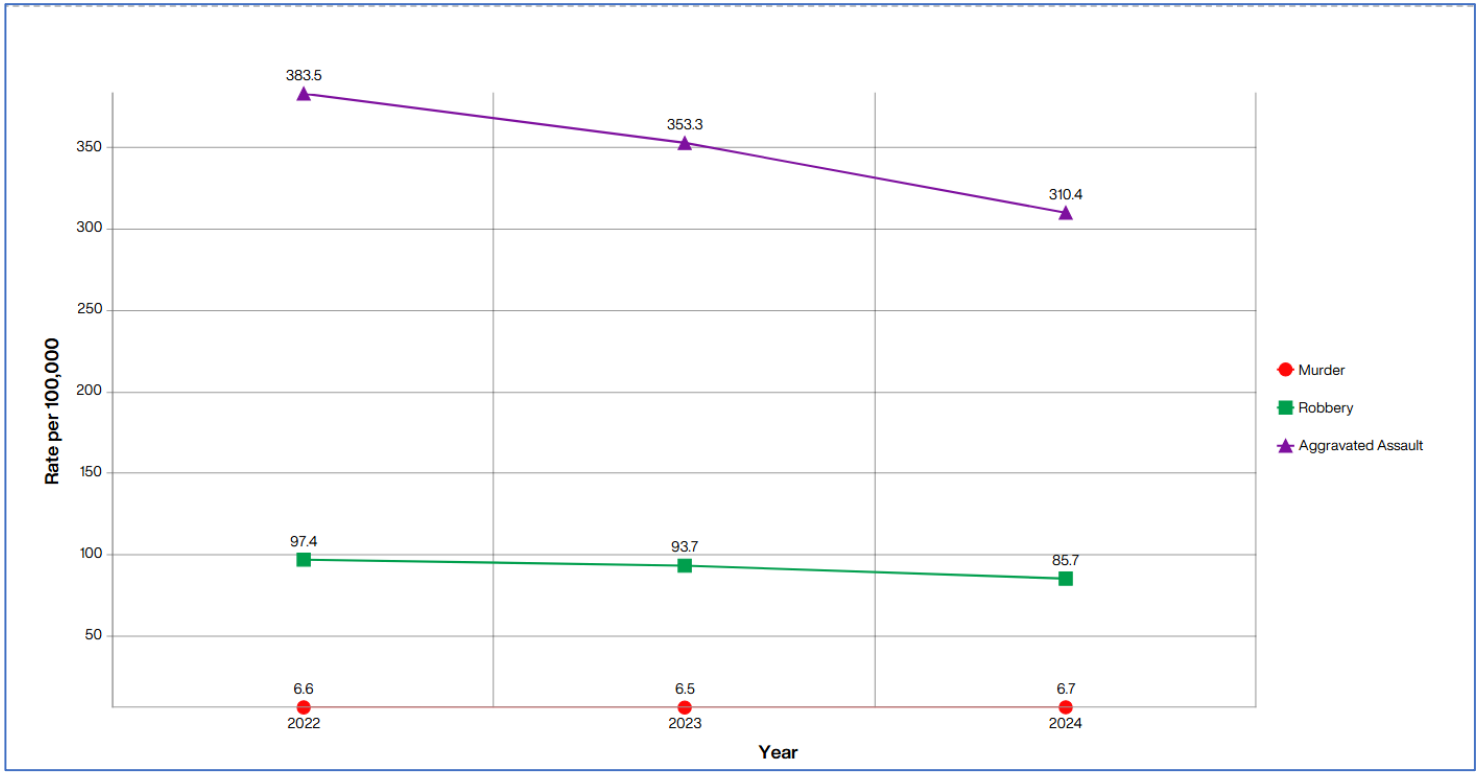
Social determinants such as violence, food insecurity, unstable housing, and poverty are not simply environmental challenges; they create chronic biological stress that alters brain function, pain perception, and decision making. Understanding this connection helps explain why communities experiencing greater social adversity also experience higher rates of substance use and overdose.



Violence Changes the Brain



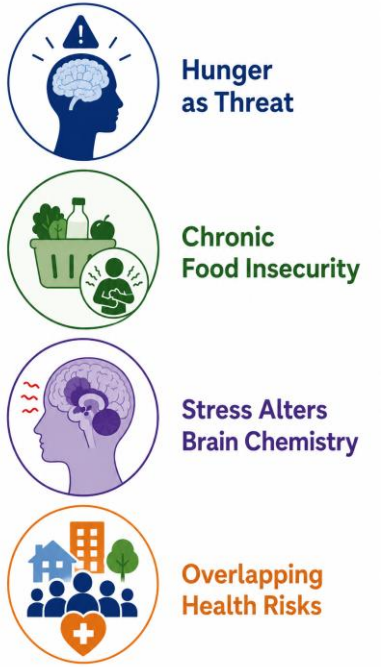
Violent Crimes Rates in Austin, Texas



Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

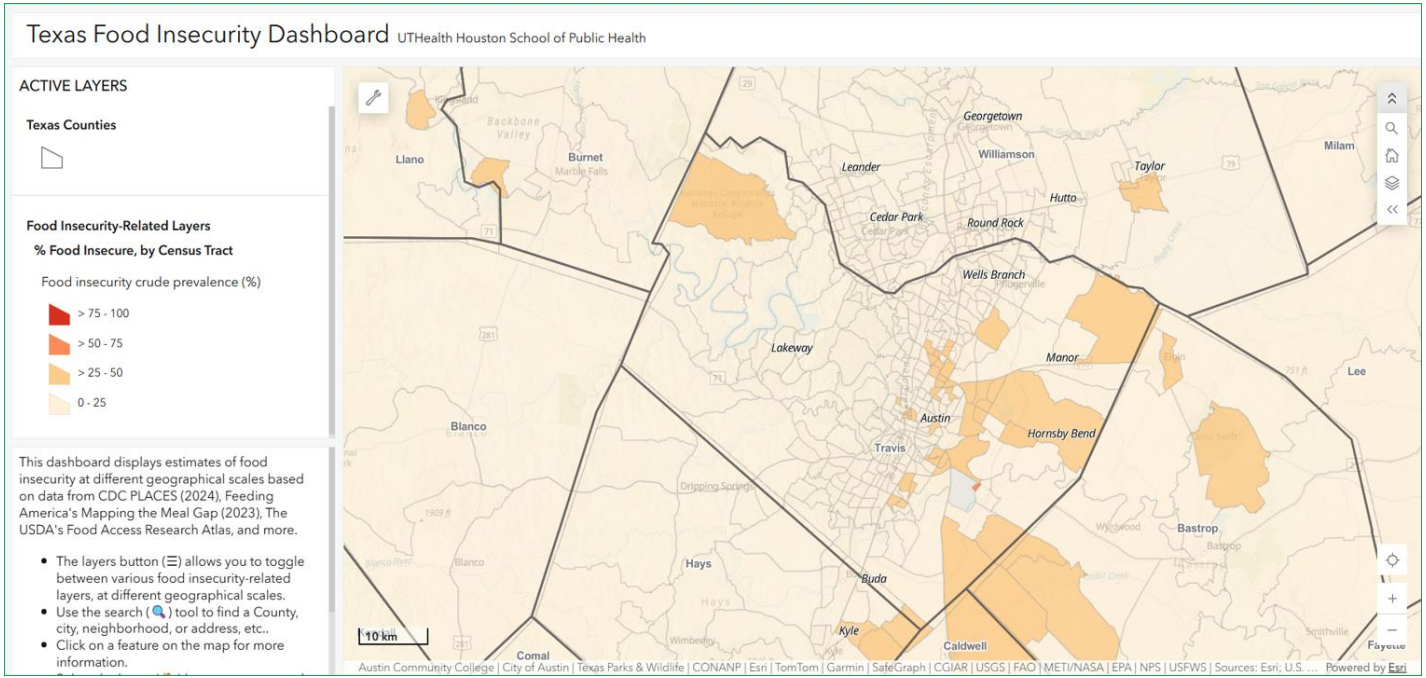
Hunger = Stress

- Hunger is interpreted by the brain as a survival threat.
- Chronic food insecurity activates stress pathways.
- Persistent stress alters brain chemistry involved in pain regulation.
- Communities with food insecurity often experience overlapping risks for poor health and substance use.



Texas Food Insecurity Dashboard

This dashboard displays estimates of food insecurity at different geographical scales based on data from CDC PLACES (2024), Feeding America's Mapping the Meal Gap (2023), The USDA's Food Access Research Atlas, and more

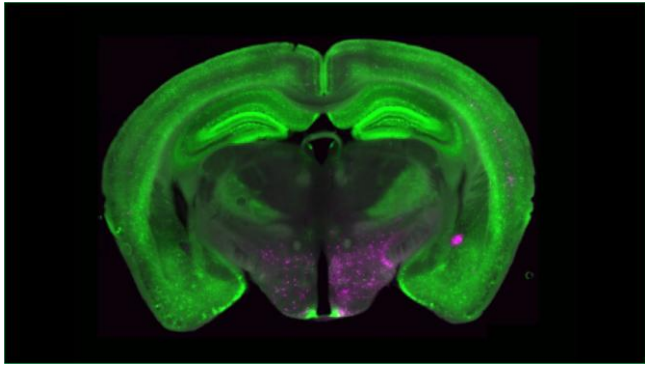


How Stress Rewires Pain

Chronic Stress Changes Brain Function

Chronic stress can:

- Increase pain sensitivity
- Alter endocannabinoid signaling (AEA and 2-AG)
- Reduce resilience to chronic pain
- Affect reward and motivation pathways involved in addiction
- Hunger and Pain Pathways
- Pain signals from the anterior cingulate cortex communicate with the hypothalamus.
- Survival pathways prioritize pain and stress responses.
- These interconnected brain circuits influence pain perception, appetite, and behavior.

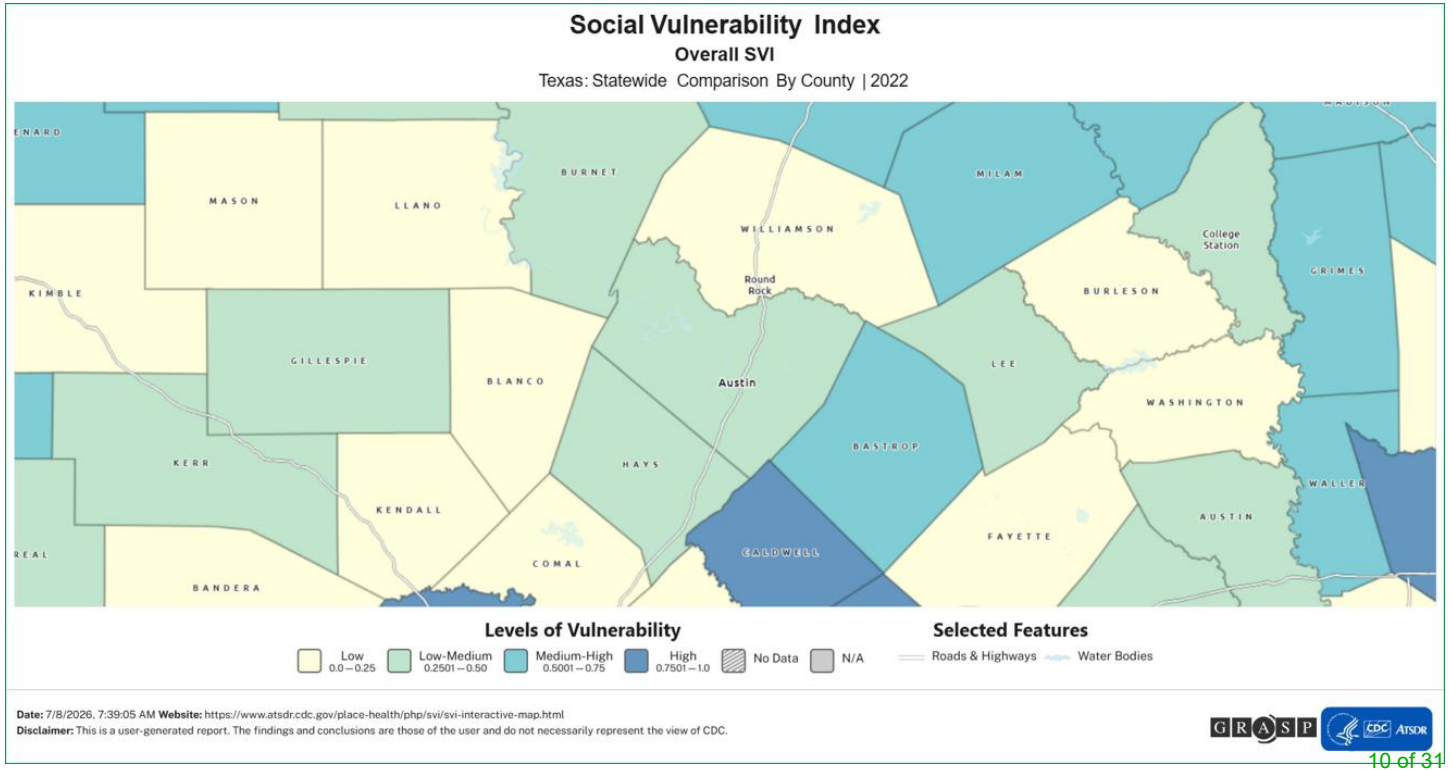


Fluorescent imaging of NPY+ neurons (green) throughout the brain is shown in addition to neurons in magenta that send projections to the PBN. Credit: J. Nicholas Betley

From Biology to Geography

Chronic stress leaves a biological footprint, and that footprint can be seen on the map.

Travis County has a Low to Medium SVI

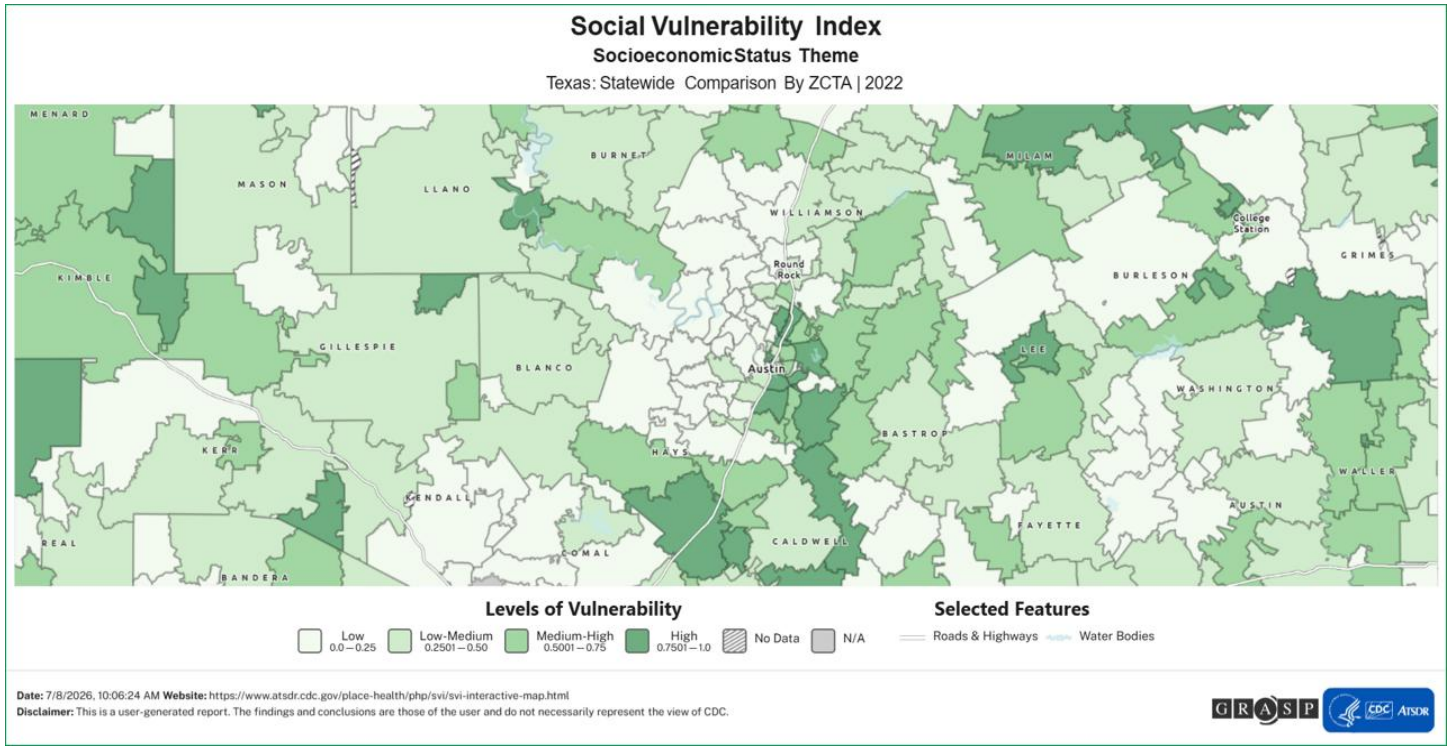


Souce: CDC Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

From Biology to Geography

Chronic stress leaves a biological footprint, and that footprint can be seen on the map.

East Austin shows a High SVI

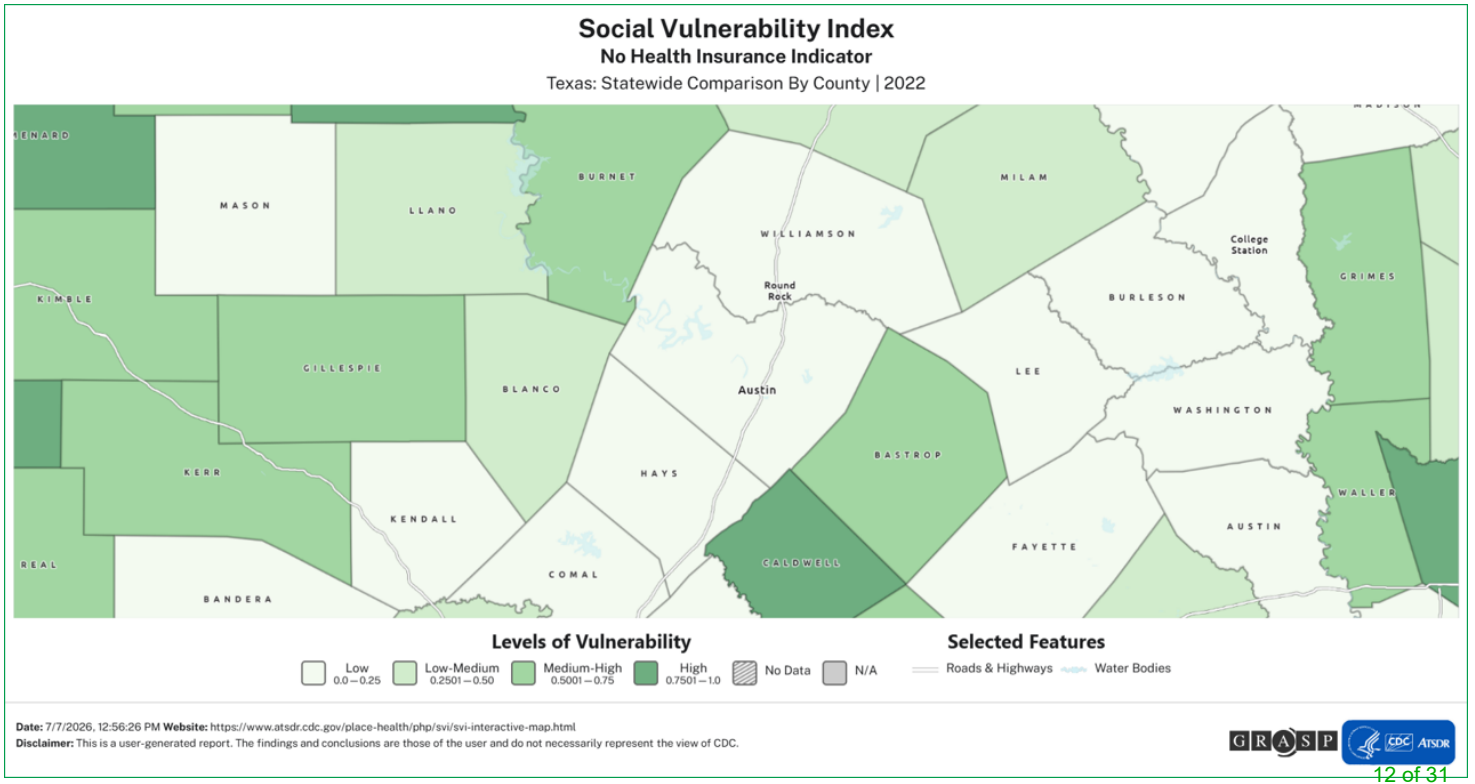


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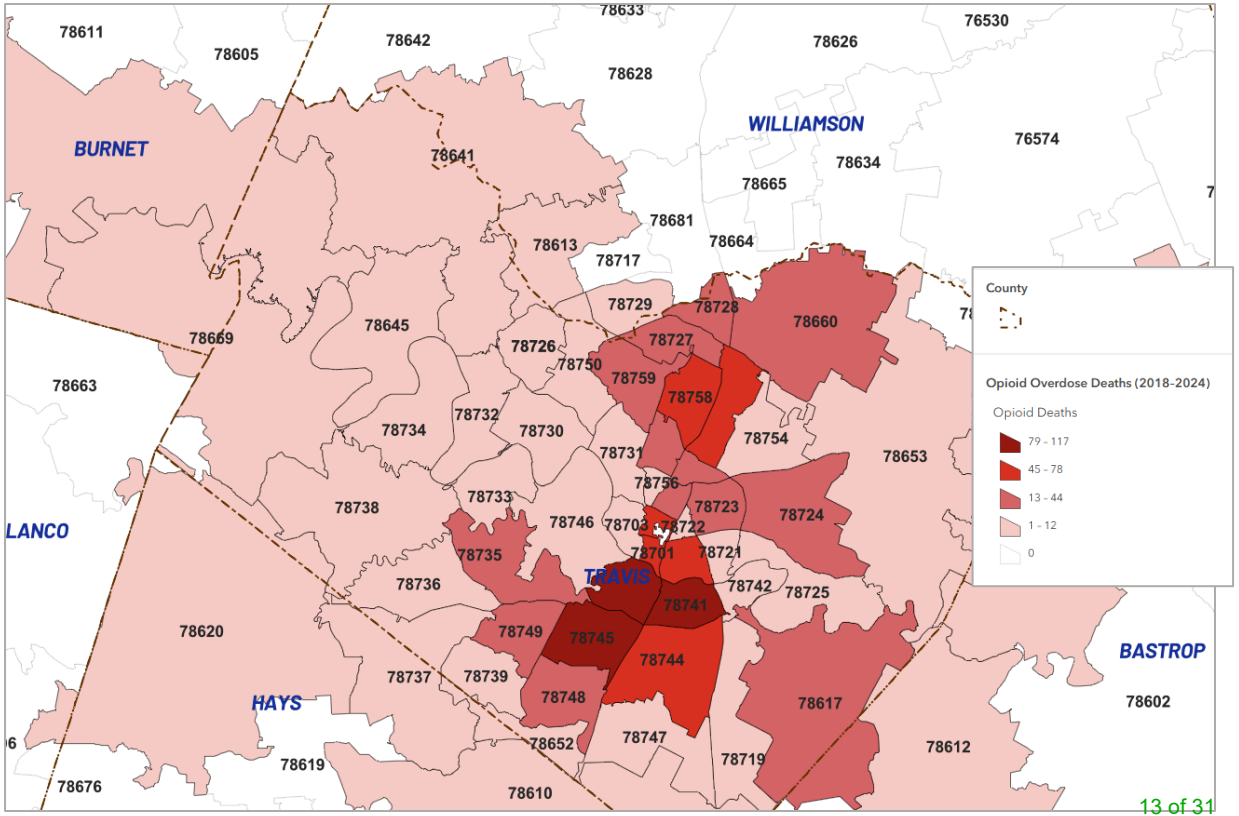


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Mapping the Epidemic

The Overdose Burden

From 2018 through 2023, Travis County experienced a steady increase in both fatal and non-fatal overdoses, driven largely by fentanyl. Geospatial analysis revealed where overdoses were occurring, how patterns changed over time, and which populations were disproportionately affected. These insights transformed surveillance data into actionable public health intelligence.

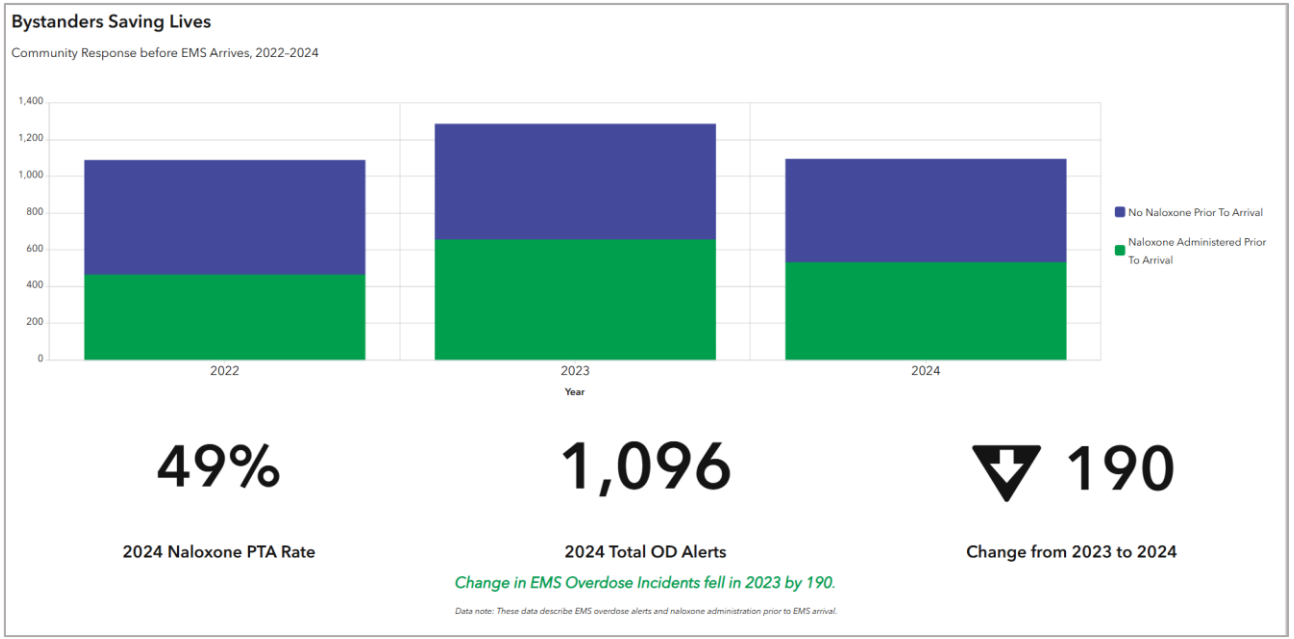


Source: Travis County Medical Examiner

Austin- Travis County EMS

Seeing the Crisis in Real Time

Naloxone administration before Austin Travis County EMS arrival increased from 20.6% of overdose responses in 2021 to 51.3% in 2023 and remained high at 49.0% in 2024. This trend suggests expanded community access and response capacity, while also showing that about half of overdose alerts still had no naloxone administered before arrival.





Austin- Travis County EMS

Austin- Travis County EMS data provides one of the earliest indicators of emerging overdose clusters, allowing public health to respond before mortality trends become apparent.

Emergency Medical Services provide one of the earliest indicators of overdose activity. As Naloxone became more widely available, community administration before Austin- Travis County EMS arrival increased dramatically, demonstrating greater public awareness and expanded access to life-saving medication.

Despite this progress, nearly half of overdose responses still occurred without naloxone being administered before Austin- Travis County EMS arrived, highlighting opportunities for continued outreach.

AUSTIN'S COMMITMENT TO

ENDING OVERDOSES

A timeline of verified City Council actions addressing the opioid and overdose crisis through prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery.



Recognize → Fund → Respond → Expand

2018
Opioid Epidemic Resolution

Resolution No. 20180524-038

Recognized opioid misuse as a growing public health concern and directed City leadership to coordinate prevention, treatment, education, surveillance, and harm reduction efforts.

2021
Opioid Settlement Resolution

Resolution No. 20220616-052

Approved Austin's participation in national opioid settlements, securing funding for long-term opioid mitigation, treatment, prevention, and recovery initiatives.

2023
Drug Overdose Public Health Crisis

Resolution No. 20230413-042

Declared drug overdoses a public health crisis and directed opioid settlement funding toward naloxone access, harm reduction, treatment, overdose surveillance, and community partnerships.

2023
Narcan Access Initiative

Ordinance No. 20230608-079

Expanded access to Narcan through sustainable funding, community distribution, business training, and placement of overdose response kits in public facilities.

CITY OF AUSTIN

HEALTHY. SAFE. TOGETHER.

Resolution numbers verified against official AustinTexas.gov City Council Public Records Online Database: https://services.austintexas.gov/edims/search.cfm

Designed with ChatGPT

Council Declared a Public Health Emergency

In 2022, Austin City Council declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency and expanded investments in prevention, treatment, and recovery.

Major initiatives included:

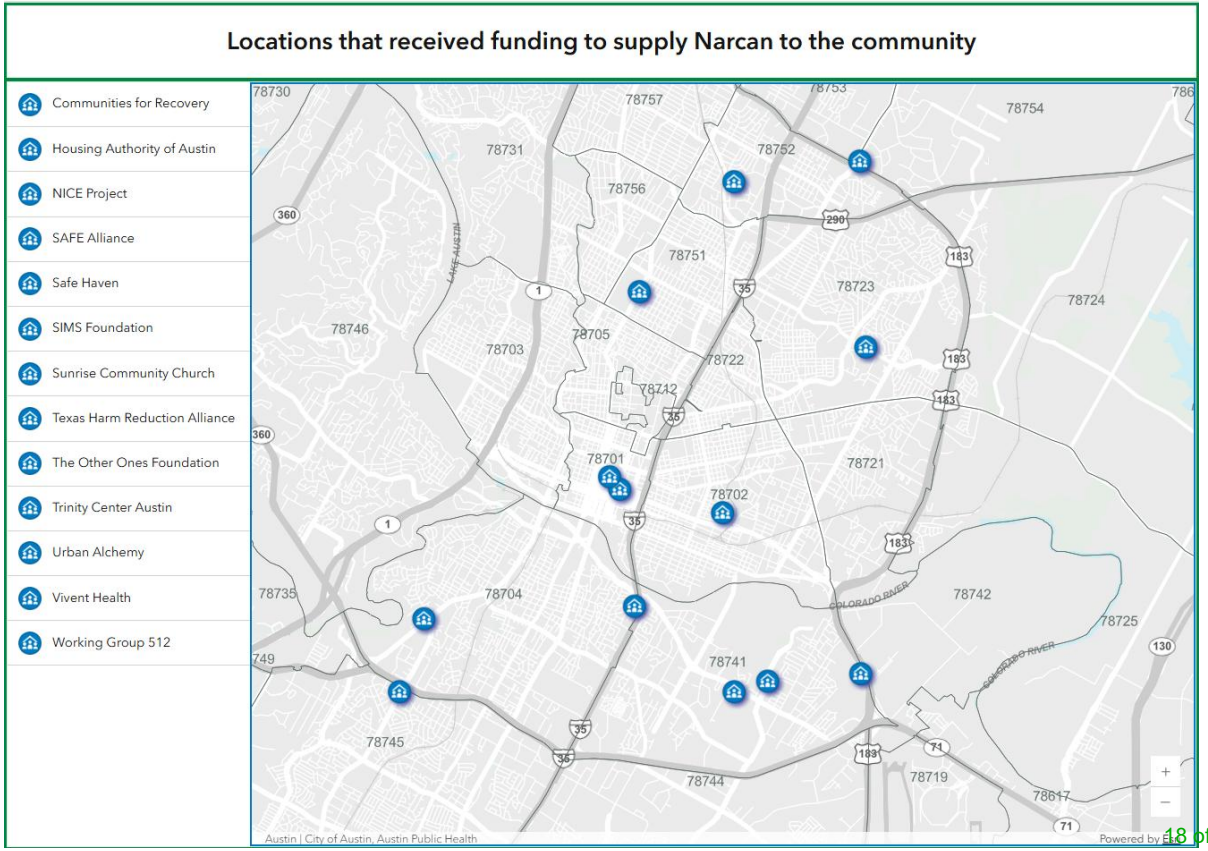
- Developing an integrated overdose surveillance dashboard.
- Expanding naloxone distribution.
- Supporting recovery organizations.
- Increasing public education.
- Strengthening partnerships across healthcare, public safety, and community organizations.
- Together, these initiatives established a coordinated public health response focused on saving lives.

Expanding Harm Reduction

Increasing access to naloxone became one of the community's most effective interventions.

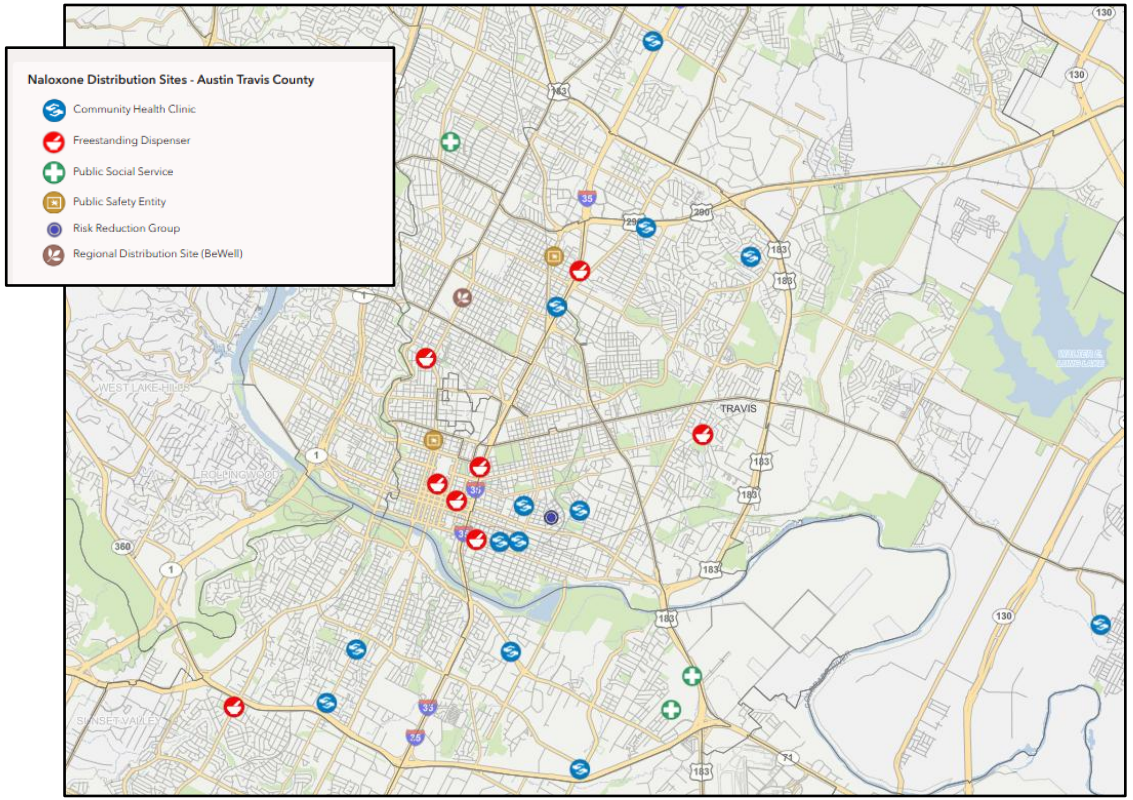
Today, pharmacies, healthcare providers, community organizations, shelters, libraries, and outreach teams distribute naloxone throughout Austin–Travis County, making overdose reversal medication readily available to residents.

Funded Naloxone Organizations



Naloxone Access Points Across Austin

An interactive map showing the growing network of naloxone access points across Austin and Travis County, helping place life-saving resources closer to communities experiencing the greatest overdose burden.

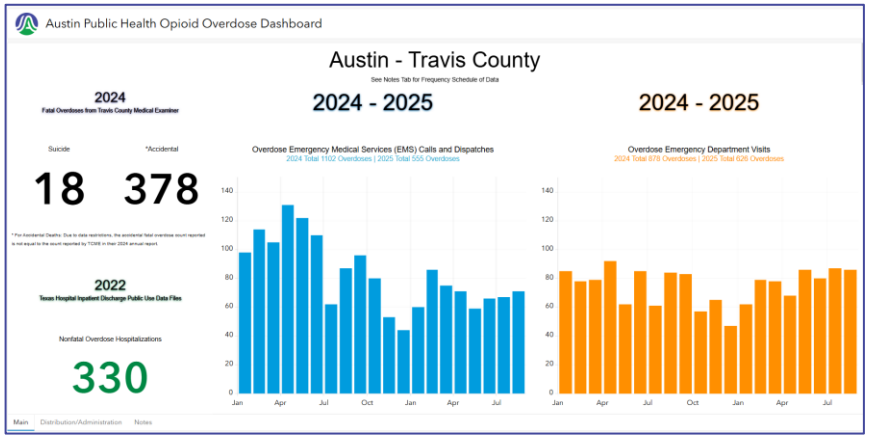


Data Driving Action

In 2023, Austin Public Health launched an integrated Opioid Overdose Dashboard combining Austin- Travis County EMS, hospital, and mortality data into a single surveillance platform.

For the first time, public health leaders could monitor overdose trends in near real time, identify emerging hotspots, evaluate interventions, and rapidly respond to changing conditions.

Data became a decision-making tool rather than simply a reporting tool.





Bringing Resources Together

Austin–Travis County Opioid Resource Hub

The Opioid Resource Hub connects residents, providers, and community organizations with prevention resources, treatment services, recovery programs, educational materials, and current overdose data

This centralized platform supports informed decision-making while increasing public awareness and access to care.



Measuring Progress

Evaluating Harm Reduction



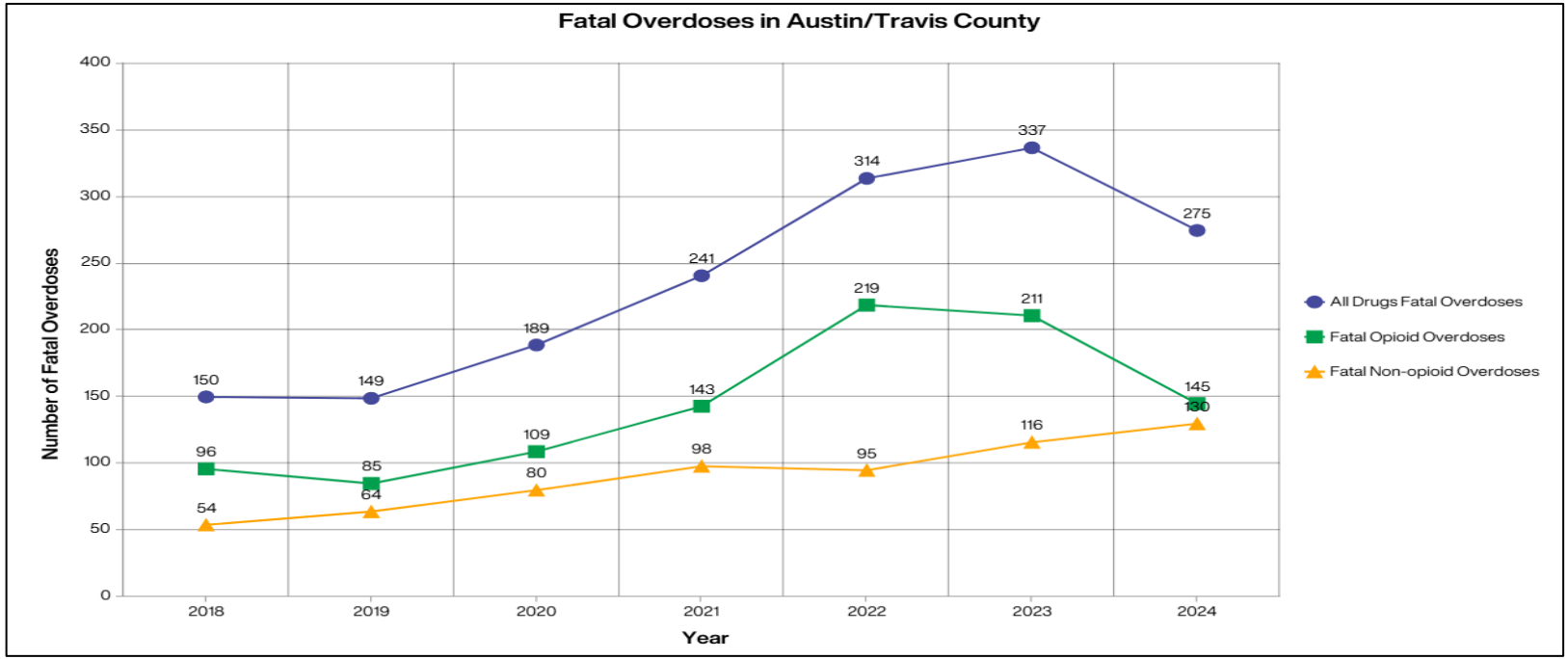
Fall 2025 Interns with Dr Walkes

In 2025, Austin Public Health expanded its evaluation through the Network for Advancing Harm Reduction StoryMap.

Working alongside community partners, the Office of the Medical Director documented not only measurable outcomes but also the collaborative relationships and lived experiences that continue to strengthen Austin's response.

A Turning Point

Tracking Progress Over Time

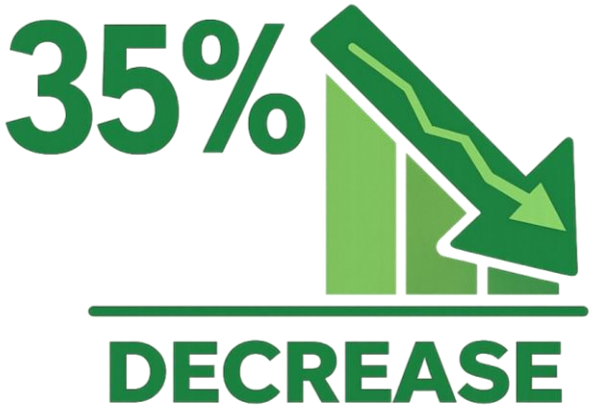


Source: Texas Health Data/Texas Vital Statistics

Reduction in Opioid Deaths in 2024

After several years of increasing fatalities, 2024 marked a significant shift.

- Opioid overdose deaths declined by approximately **35%** compared with 2023.
- Total overdose deaths also decreased for the first time in several years.
- Expanded access to naloxone, improved surveillance, stronger partnerships, and coordinated harm reduction efforts likely contributed to this encouraging trend.



While additional evaluation is ongoing, these findings demonstrate the value of combining timely data with coordinated public health action.

Looking Ahead

The next generation of Austin's overdose surveillance system will integrate interactive analytics and dynamic reporting, creating an even more responsive platform for monitoring trends, evaluating interventions, and informing policy. The goal is to move beyond surveillance toward prediction, prevention, and continuous improvement.

Austin's overdose response is moving from crisis recognition to coordinated action. By connecting data, geography, community partnerships, and harm reduction services, Austin Public Health is building the foundation for a more responsive and life-saving public health system.

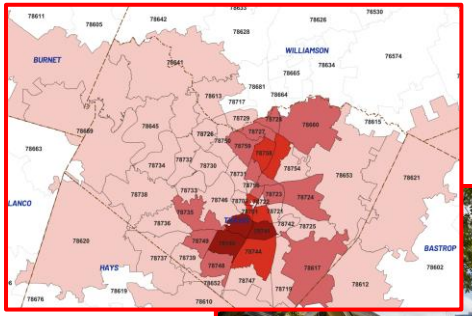


The Future of Prevention



Closing Reflection – Every Life Matters

Behind every map… is a neighborhood.





Behind every data point …is a person.





Behind every trend is an opportunity to prevent another overdose.



The Future

Austin–Travis County's experience demonstrates that when data, partnerships, and community action come together, public health can change the course of an epidemic. This work continues, not simply to reduce overdose deaths, but to build healthier, safer, and more resilient communities for generations to come.





Thank you

Desmar Walkes MD
Austin-Travis County Health Authority
Austin Public Health Medical Director
desmar.walkes@austintexas.gov

StoryMap Creative Team: Riya Ghosal, Tracy Haywood, Quentarius Jones, David Kulpanowski, Courtney Lucas, Vaishnavi Narasimhan, Tia Olarinde, and Travis Wagner.

