



Ohio Data Shows Felony & Prison Response to Addiction Fails to Lower Overdose Deaths

National research has shown **that there is no relationship between the severity of a state's approach to drug imprisonment and the level of drug problems in that state.**¹ Every state in the country is trying to address drug problems and in particular reduce drug overdose deaths, but this **research shows that a felony and incarceration-focused approach toward drug policy is simply not an effective way to deter people from using and overdosing on drugs.** An analysis of county-by-county data in Ohio finds this same lack of a relationship.

If the threat of imprisonment effectively deterred drug use, the Ohio counties that send the most people to prison for low-level felony cases, like drug possession, or sent many to prison for probation violations would see the lowest overdose rates. That is not what is happening. In Ohio, regardless of county size, there is no correlation between sending more people to prison and lower overdose rates.

Low-level drug possession offenses are usually Class 4 or 5 felonies (the lowest 2 classes in Ohio). Drug possession accounts for a substantial percentage of these charges, along with property crimes like thefts and frauds and other lower-level offenses.

Counties that send lots of people to prison for Class 4/5 felonies still see high overdose rates²³:

- » **Scioto County has the 12th highest prison admissions rate for drug possession (71 percent higher than the statewide average). But its overdose rate is also high: It ranks 10th statewide, with an overdose rate 46 percent higher than the statewide average.**
- » **Fayette County has Ohio's second highest prison admission rate for possession charges—292.2 per 100,000, more than 3.5 times the state average. Its overdose rate is also among the highest in the state: It ranks 5th, with 45.7 overdoses per 100,000 people—more than 1.5 times the state average.**
- » **Conversely, Medina County has the state's lowest incarceration rate for F4/F5 felonies. Medina not only sends very few people to prison for the leading categories of drug offenses, but its overdose rate is also quite low: It ranks 62nd out of 88 counties.**

¹ <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2018/03/more-imprisonment-does-not-reduce-state-drug-problems>

² Sources of the data: F4/F5 County Admissions data are from DRC CY 2017 Commitment Report; Opioid Death Rates data from Ohio Department of Public Health 2017 Ohio Drug Overdose Data: General Findings; Recidivism data from Ohio DRC 2018 Recidivism Report.



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Similarly, sending people back to prison for parole violations does not mean fewer overdoses.

Regardless of their size, Ohio counties with high rates of probation violations for failure to adhere to release conditions that can result in a return to custody do not have fewer overdoses⁴:

- » **Scioto County sends 14.6 percent of people on supervision back to prison for technical violations, well above the state average of 9.5 percent. Yet—as previously noted—it is ranked 10th in overdoses.**
- » **Marion County sends an even higher percentage of people on supervision back to prison, 16.5 percent. Yet it has the 12th highest overdose rate, at 36.7 per 100,000).**
- » **Erie County returns 17.9 percent of people on supervision to prison on technical violations; it has the 15th highest overdose rate (33.9 per 100,000).**
- » **Once again, Medina County illustrates the opposite relationship: A low rate of revocation and a low rate of drug overdoses. The parole revocation rate is about half the state average, at 4.7 percent, and it has a similarly low overdose rate (with just 17.1 overdoses per 100,000 people, it is ranked 62nd in the state).**

³ A rate per 100,000 is a way to convert the incidence of something happening in a county (e.g. an overdose, or being admitted to prison) so that you can compare counties with large populations, and small populations in a way that it is comparable, controlling for the fact some places are bigger or smaller than other places. The average rate of prison admission in Ohio Counties is 81 per 100,000—that is, if there were 100,000 people in that county, 81 one of them would be admitted to prison. The average overdose rate is 27.9 per 100,000 (age adjusted), which means, if there were 100,000 people living in a county, about 28 would experience an overdose death.

⁴ In Ohio, the average revocation rate among people released from the DRC was 9.5%. In other words, if 100 people were released from prison to a county, about 10 people, would be sent back to prison for technical violations. Because this a rate, it is comparable to the rate per 100,000 of overdose deaths if one wants to show the relative impact of comparing whether counties that revoke more people to prison from supervision see any benefit in reduced overdose deaths. The rate of overdose deaths for the comparison is the same, 27.9 per 100,000, or put another way, if there were 100,000 people in a county, the average Ohio county would see about 28 people overdose over the period.

