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More than 1,000 Wisconsinites died from excessive drinking in 2020 — nearly a 25% increase from the year prior



Madeline Heim

USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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MADISON - More than a thousand Wisconsin residents died from alcohol-induced causes in 2020 — a nearly 25% increase from the year prior.

The increase was highlighted in a report released Thursday by the nonpartisan Wisconsin Policy Forum, which analyzed mortality data that the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released in late December.

The data only include deaths that were directly attributable to alcohol, such as cases of poisoning and liver disease, not deaths that may have been linked to alcohol, such as car accidents and falls.

Alcohol deaths in the Badger State have risen steadily from the beginning of the millennium, but the latest uptick is the state's sharpest one-year increase since 1999. In 2020, death certificate data show 1,077 residents died due to alcohol-induced causes, compared to 865 in 2019, and 356 in 1999.

The increase was most pronounced among middle-aged Wisconsinites. According to the Policy Forum report, this reflects that deaths due to causes such as liver disease occur after several years of heavy drinking. Alcohol-related death causes that more often affect younger people, such as alcohol poisoning, account for a much smaller share of the total deaths.

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Long-term increases in deaths are occurring in all racial and ethnic groups, the report said, but researchers noted that the rate of Black Wisconsinites dying from alcohol-induced causes over the past decade has outpaced the rate of other Black Americans.

In 2019, the alcohol-induced death rate for Black Wisconsinites was higher than that of white Wisconsinites for the first time since 2005, according to the report. It declined slightly in 2020 but still outpaces the national rate for Black people.

It's an issue that needs more study, said Maureen Busalacchi, director of the Wisconsin Alcohol Policy Project, which is housed within the Medical College of Wisconsin and works with communities to implement practices that reduce underage and binge drinking. Black residents are living in the same environment as every Wisconsinite, she said — a state whose alcohol culture is deeply entrenched.

Wisconsin has in recent decades topped national lists of places where people drink heavily. Last summer, data from the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute found that Outagamie and Calumet counties had the nation's highest percentages of residents who report drinking excessively, and several other counties ranked among the highest.

A 2019 report from the same group found that in the year prior, nearly a quarter of Wisconsinites reported binge drinking (five drinks or more per occasion for men and four drinks or more per occasion for women), compared to 16% of U.S. residents overall.

The amount of alcohol Wisconsinites bought during the pandemic also made headlines: The state collected 16.6% more in revenue from excise taxes on alcoholic beverages in the last fiscal year that ended in June 2021, an increase that hadn't been seen in five decades.

And even though some people may have driven less in 2020 because of the pandemic, there were 167 people killed in alcohol-related crashes, according to the state Department of Transportation.

That number, which isn't included in the CDC total, was up from 140 in 2019 — though it was roughly in line with the five-year average of 160.

Busalacchi said it doesn't surprise her, given the long-term figures, that alcohol-induced death rates are rising, and said legislative policies meant to expand access to alcohol may have opened the door.

"All of this ... it didn't happen by accident," Busalacchi said. "There were policy changes and the intended outcome has essentially happened."

No one intended that people would die, she said, but a culture of excessive alcohol use has led to it.

Both Busalacchi and the Policy Forum report mentioned a 2021 bill signed into law by Gov. Tony Evers that would allow bars and restaurants to start selling wine and cocktails to go. That runs counter to approaches recommended in a 2020 brief from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to make alcohol less readily available.

The same brief recommends reducing the amount of hours in a day that alcohol can be sold and curbing the amount of liquor licenses that municipal governments issue.

The Policy Forum report also noted that taxing alcohol at a higher rate could reduce consumption — a move researchers wrote would "likely be politically unpopular" — and suggested lawmakers put money from Wisconsin's budget surplus toward prevention, intervention and treatment for alcohol abuse.

"I feel like we're at a crossroads in Wisconsin, and we need to really think about how we want to approach this," Busalacchi said.

Contact reporter Madeline Heim at 920-996-7266 or mheim@gannett.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@madeline_heim](https://twitter.com/madeline_heim).