



# 2016 Fatal Overdose Victims and the Criminal Justice System



To address the rising number of drug-related deaths in Knox County, District Attorney General Charme Allen spearheaded the Drug Related Death Task Force in 2017 with Appalachia HIDTA, Knox County Regional Forensic Center, Knox County Sheriff's Office, and Knoxville Police Department. Through this joint effort, inter-agency data is now shared as part of a multi-pronged approach to reducing drug abuse and its consequences in our community.

This report provides background on those who fatally overdosed in 2016, details the connections they had to the criminal justice system, and locates possible opportunities for intervention.

In 2016, there were 224 drug related deaths in Knox County.<sup>1</sup> Of these fatal overdose victims, nearly half were arrested and/or incarcerated in Knox County at some point during the last five years (see Figure I).<sup>2</sup>

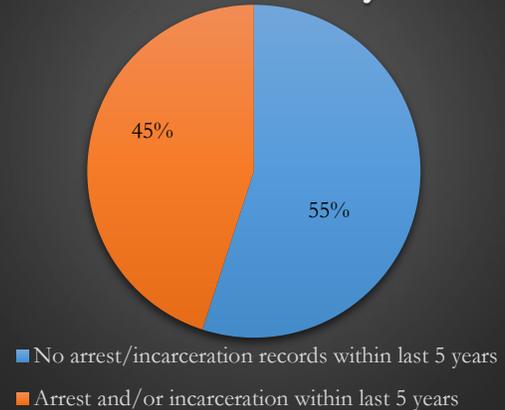
Of those fatal overdose victims who were incarcerated at any point in the last five years, 67% died of a drug overdose within 18 months of their release.<sup>3</sup> Figure II shows this population in more detail. The majority of this group died within 90 days of release from jail. The second largest group died between three and six months of release.

These findings support research showing that the days and months after release from jail or prison are some of the most vulnerable for those who abuse drugs.<sup>4</sup> Studies have shown that the highest risk of overdose is from release to three months out, especially in the first one to two weeks.<sup>5,6</sup> More than a third of those who fatally overdosed in 2016 had some interaction with law enforcement in the 12 months leading up to their death.<sup>7</sup>

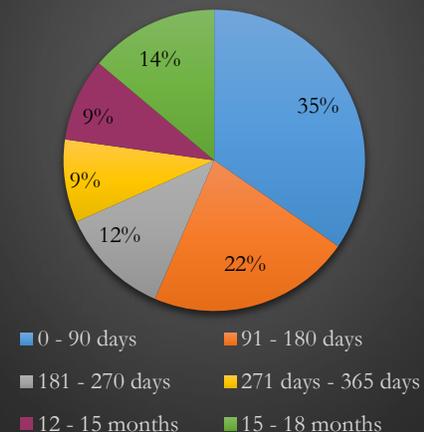
As Figure III (page 2) shows, the highest concentration had an interaction with law enforcement within 90 days of their death. Notably, almost 20% of those who had some interaction with law enforcement in the last year had it within a month of their death.

The Knox County District Attorney's Office is committed to attacking Knox County's drug problem from all angles, including prosecution and the use of prevention and treatment measures. This data presents critical opportunities to engage individuals involved in the criminal justice system that are at risk of a drug overdose. In addition to identifying opportunities for prevention and intervention, law enforcement and prosecutors have pinpointed community hot spots and supply sources through collectively reviewing drug related death cases. Data sharing and collaborative partnerships are stemming the opioid epidemic in our community by yielding targeted investigations and successful prosecutions.

**Figure I. 2016 Fatal Overdose Victims, Knox County**



**Figure II. Time Between Release and Death, Victims with Recent Incarceration History**



**Figure III. Days Between Last Law Enforcement Interaction and Death, 2016 Fatal Overdose Victims**



### Major Points

There were 224 drug related deaths in Knox County in 2016.

The criminal justice system frequently interacts with those at risk of overdosing on drugs.

The risk of drug overdose increases significantly following a person's release from incarceration.

The high number of people who fatally overdosed and had recent contact with law enforcement or the court system suggests an opportunity for intervention.

### Critical Statistics

- 45% of those who died of a drug overdose in Knox County last year had an arrest and/or incarceration history in the five years before their death.
- Of those fatal overdose victims with an incarceration history in the last five years, 67% died of an overdose within 18 months of their release.
- The majority of those fatal overdose victims with an incarceration history in the last five years died within 90 days of their release.
- 34% of those who fatally overdosed in 2016 had one or more interactions with law enforcement in the 12 months leading up to their death.
- 71% of fatal overdose victims who had interaction with law enforcement within 12 months of their death had it 90 days or fewer before dying.
- 15% of the total number of people who fatally overdosed in 2016 died within 6 months of being released from jail.

### Limitations

The analysis presented here is only representative of one year of data. Prior and future year data should be analyzed for context. In some cases, the date of release from incarceration was unavailable. In these instances, the date of arrest was used. *Law enforcement interaction* is used to mean any time a person is arrested, cited, incarcerated, or involved in an incident.

<sup>1</sup> Knox County Regional Forensic Center, *Knox & Anderson County 2017 Drug Related Death Report*.

<sup>2</sup> 101 persons had arrest/incarceration records within five years of their death. District Attorney's Office data.

<sup>3</sup> 86 persons had an incarceration record within five years of their death. 58 persons were released from incarceration within 18 months of their death. District Attorney's Office data.

<sup>4</sup> Groot E, Kouyoumdjian FG, Kiefer L, Madadi P, Gross J, Prevost B, et al. (2016) Drug Toxicity Deaths after Release from Incarceration in Ontario, 2006-2013: Review of Coroner's Cases. *PLoS ONE* 11(7): e0157512.

<sup>5</sup> Binswanger IA, Stern MF, Deyo RA, et al. Release from Prison — A High Risk of Death for Former Inmates. *The New England Journal of Medicine*. 2007;356(2):157-165. doi:10.1056/NEJMsa064115.

<sup>6</sup> Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Risk of Overdose Death Following Release from Prison or Jail. November 2014.

<sup>7</sup> 34% of those who overdosed in 2016 had LEI within a year of their death. District Attorney's Office data.