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A Health Equity Foundation

Drug-Related Deaths Surge in Southern Colorado

[◀ Back to Newsroom](#)



Drug addiction has taken a toll in small towns like Antonito, six miles from the New Mexico border in rural Conejos County.

(Photo by Joe Mahoney)

BLOG



Thu, 01/21/2016

By Kristin Jones

New data shows that southern Colorado is bearing the brunt of the drug epidemic in our state.

Across the country, drug overdose deaths have soared, reaching rates in 2014 similar to deaths from AIDS at the peak of the HIV epidemic in 1995, according to [new county-level estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(http://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs-data-visualization/drug-poisoning-mortality/\)](http://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs-data-visualization/drug-poisoning-mortality/) and [an analysis by The New York Times \(http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/07/us/drug-overdose-deaths-in-the-us.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/07/us/drug-overdose-deaths-in-the-us.html).

A large swath of southern Colorado, from Conejos County in the west to Las Animas County in the east and up to Pueblo County, has been deeply affected, with death rates of more than 20 per 100,000—among the highest in the country.

The reach of the epidemic isn't limited to this region. Overdoses have increased statewide, including in Adams County in the Denver metro area, Jackson County in the north and Montrose County on the western slope.

But the fast rise of the drug epidemic in southern Colorado's rural counties—which are also some of the poorest in the state—have put particular pressure on families, schools and communities that lack the concentration of resources for prevention and treatment that may be available in some urban areas.

Antonito is a Conejos County town of fewer than 800 people in the San Luis Valley, a nine-minute drive from the border of New Mexico. The rate of drug-related deaths more than doubled in this sparsely populated county from 2002 to 2014, but that statistic doesn't capture the full extent of the toll that addiction has taken here.

In a series of meetings over the past few months, residents who were asked by The Trust to identify their community's biggest challenges repeatedly raised the issue of drug and alcohol abuse.

Tori Martinez, an Antonito resident whom The Trust has contracted for research and community organizing, says a crackdown on prescription drug abuse has led people to seek the more easily accessible heroin and methamphetamine.

In Antonito, it's an open secret where the "drug houses" are in the community—places where drugs are sold and consumed, says Martinez. Residents complain about a lack of law enforcement action, and also a lack of treatment options in the area.

"It's difficult for single moms to leave their children and go seek treatment," says Martinez. "The long-term consequence of not seeking treatment is that they ultimately end up losing their kids."

That puts additional burdens on grandparents, who often step in as guardians, as well as on schools, and of course on the kids themselves.

"It tears up families," says Freddie Jaquez, who leads the [San Luis Valley Area Health Education Center \(http://www.slvahec.org/\)](http://www.slvahec.org/), a past Trust grantee that works with medical providers and the community to stop drug abuse in the region.

Jaquez says that addressing the wave of prescription drug abuse in the region has been easier in many ways than tackling the epidemic of street-drug abuse—especially heroin—that came in its wake. An agreement struck by area hospitals in late 2012 succeeded in stemming prescription opioid abuse by cutting down on the volume of prescriptions being written, says Jaquez, and controlling "doctor-shopping" by addicts.

"We can control prescription drugs. We need the participation of the medical community, which we're getting. But street drugs?" Jaquez says. "It's very difficult to control because it's being supplied by drug dealers, and how do you stop that?"

His center recently won a federal grant to help provide naloxone to first responders and pharmacies in the region. The drug reverses the effects of an overdose, and can take the form of an easily administered nasal spray.

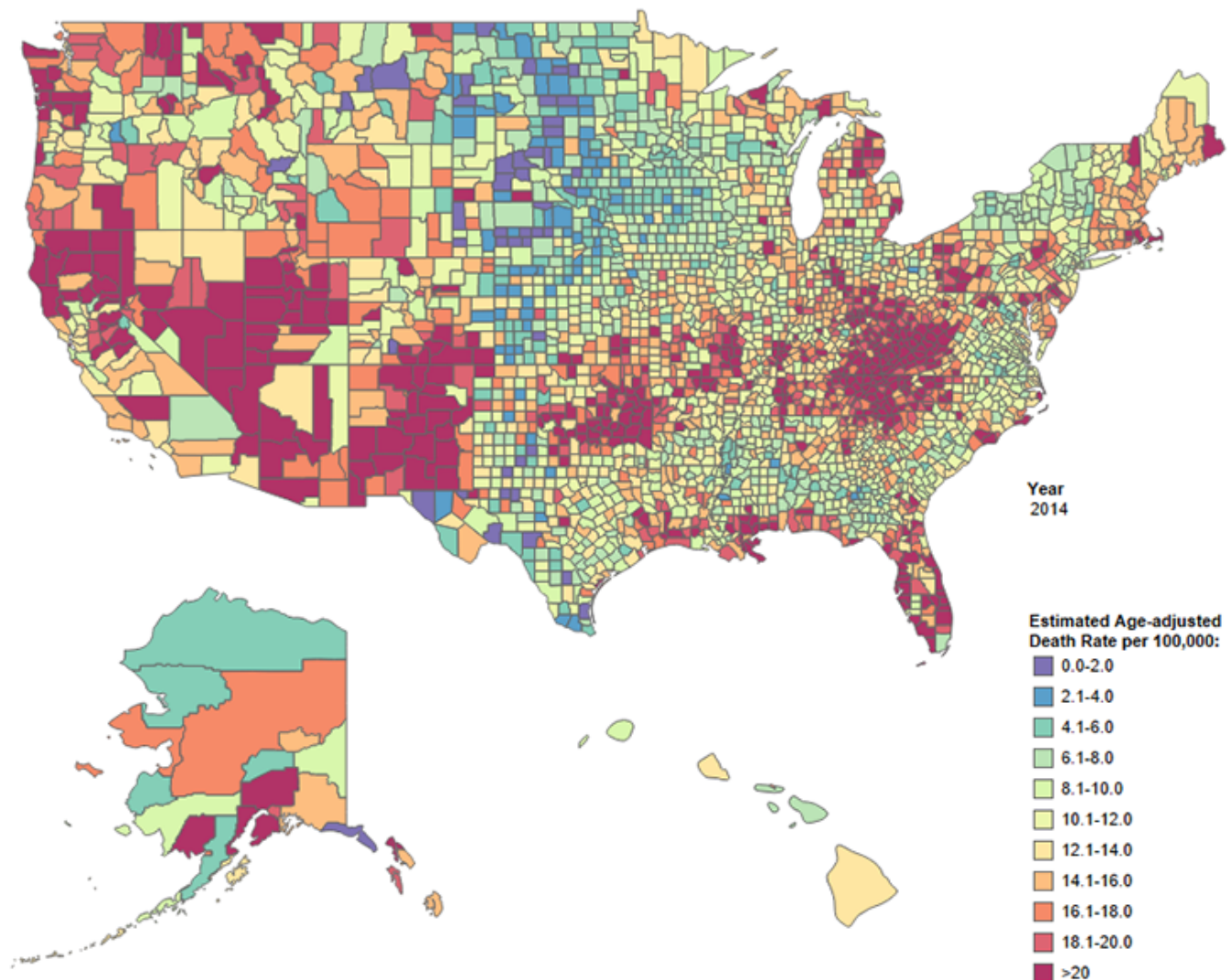
Naloxone can save lives, and may help turn the tide in the epidemic of drug deaths in the San Luis Valley. But it doesn't stop drug abuse from happening in the first place, or from mangling the lives of people who become addicted, their friends and their families. Neither will throwing the addicted

in jail, says Jaquez: “Once they come out, they’re going to come back [to using drugs].”

Endemic poverty in the area, lack of employment and limited behavioral health care options confound easy solutions. Add to that the reality that many people who abuse drugs aren’t ready for recovery.

“The answer is treatment,” says Jaquez. “But how do you do that?”

**Estimated Age-adjusted Death Rates§ for Drug Poisoning
by County, United States: 2014**



Designed by L. Rossen, B. Bastian & Y. Chong. SOURCE: CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System.

Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(http://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs-data-](http://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs-data-)

[visualization/drug-poisoning-mortality/](#))



Kristin Jones

Assistant Director of Communications
The Colorado Trust