*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**A sobering trend: Alcohol deaths up sharply in Wisconsin**

Alcohol-induced deaths rose nearly 25% in Wisconsin in 2020, the biggest one-year increase in at least two decades.

This exacerbated a pre-pandemic trend of sharply rising deaths due to alcohol, nationally and in our state. Over the last two decades, Wisconsin’s rate of such deaths has increased more sharply than nationally and now exceeds the national rate.

Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), drawn from U.S. death certificates, show 1,077 Wisconsinites died in 2020 due to alcohol-induced causes, up from 865 in 2019.

These include only the deaths that were most directly attributable to alcohol use, such as from liver disease, but exclude others where alcohol may have been a factor, such as accidents or interpersonal violence.

In 2020, we saw the largest year-over-year increase in data going back to 1999; monthly data shows the large spike in deaths began in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, in July 2020.

These findings fit a broader picture of previous research that alcohol use rose considerably amid the stress and isolation of the pandemic. They also raise the possibility of additional and potentially more extensive health and economic impacts from drinking that fall short of death but are still significant.

Alcohol-induced deaths have risen over time among virtually every demographic cohort in Wisconsin, by age, race, gender, and geography. Middle-aged Wisconsinites have seen the most pronounced impacts — likely reflecting the fact that many alcohol-induced deaths occur after many years of heavy drinking.

Long-term increases in deaths from alcohol use also occurred among all racial and ethnic groups. Yet a particular point of concern is the sharp rise in the rate of alcohol-induced deaths for Black Wisconsinites over the last decade, when it began to diverge from the rate for all Black Americans. In Wisconsin, alcohol-induced death rates for Black Wisconsinites largely tracked those for all Black Americans until 2012, after which they rose more sharply here than nationally.

In recent years, attention paid to mortality trends often centered on the rising toll of opioid deaths and most recently, on the pandemic that has claimed more than 800,000 American lives. Yet in the meantime, deaths caused by alcohol have quietly sharply accelerated — and challenges from excessive drinking appear particularly acute in Wisconsin.

While research suggests policy measures to increase the cost of alcohol — or reduce its availability and accessibility — could reduce overall consumption, such measures also may be politically difficult to advance. Another option for policymakers might be putting more resources into prevention, intervention and treatment for alcohol abuse. With the state’s budget surplus at a historic high, Wisconsin is uniquely fiscally well-positioned to do so.

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