

FINAL REPORT

JULY 2025

Appalachian Diseases of Despair

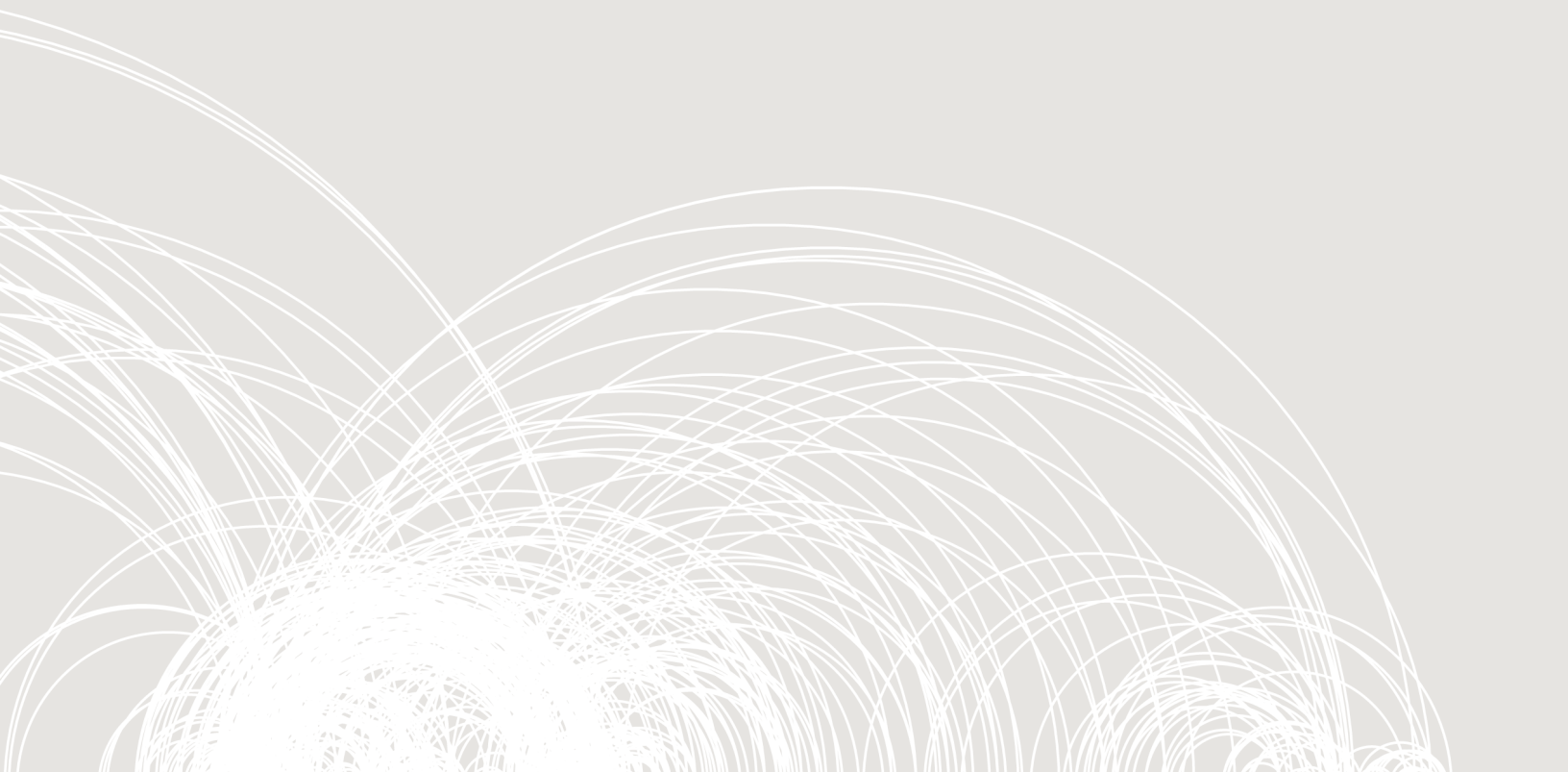
Presented by:

NORC at the University of Chicago &
East Tennessee State University

Presented to:

Appalachian Regional Commission

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The Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis
NORC at the University of Chicago
4350 East West Highway, Suite 800
Bethesda, MD 20814
<http://walshcenter.norc.org>

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ETSU Center for Rural Health and Research
PO Box 70623
Johnson City, TN 37614
<http://www.etsu.edu/cph/rural-health-research>

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Introduction

The Appalachian Region (the region), as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) authorizing legislation, is a 206,000 square-mile region that spans the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The region is comprised of 423 counties and eight independent cities in 13 states and has a population of 26.3 million people.¹

Compared to the rest of the nation, the Appalachian Region faces a greater number of disparities related to educational attainment, employment, income, and certain health outcomes. Appalachia's household income is 82 percent of the U.S. average, and 14.3 percent of Appalachians live below the poverty line.² Certain Appalachian subregions experience greater disparities than others; for example, household income and bachelor's-degree attainment are lowest in Central Appalachia.^{2,3} Prior research by NORC at the University at Chicago (NORC) and East Tennessee State University (ETSU) revealed higher-than-average mortality rates in the region, particularly in its more remote areas.^{4,5}

In 2008, NORC and ETSU conducted a study—"An Analysis of Mental Health Services and Substance Abuse Disparities and Access to Treatment Services in the Appalachian Region"—on behalf of ARC, which found that treatment admission rates for primary abuse of opiates and synthetics were higher in Appalachia than the rest of the nation, and were growing at a faster pace.⁶

In 2017, ARC commissioned NORC to investigate "diseases of despair" in Appalachia. At the time, health economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton had begun to research increasing morbidity and mortality from three main causes: alcohol, prescription- and illegal-drug overdose; suicide; and alcoholic liver disease/cirrhosis of the liver. These have been referred to as "deaths of despair," or "diseases of despair."⁷

The original 2017 Appalachian Diseases of Despair study was based on 2015 mortality data. At that time, the United States was seeing a dramatic rise in overdose deaths from synthetic opioids, particularly those involving illicitly manufactured fentanyl.⁸ In 2020, NORC and ETSU updated the Diseases of Despair report to include data through 2018.⁹ In 2022, ARC commissioned NORC and ETSU to determine changes between 2018 and 2020, which highlighted the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, 2024, and 2025, we have conducted an annual update, with this report including data through 2023, which continues to show the impact of COVID-19 on diseases of despair mortality in Appalachia.

Methods

This report presents 2023 mortality data from the Multiple Cause of Death database, which provides the underlying cause of death—as well as up to 20 additional multiple causes—as reported on an individual's death certificate by a physician, coroner, and/or medical examiner.¹⁰ These data are publicly available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (CDC WONDER). CDC WONDER provides access to data from CDC's National Center for Health Statistics National Vital Statistics System,¹¹ which collects and presents U.S. resident data for the aggregate of 50 states, New York City, and the District of Columbia, as well as for each individual state. Deaths are coded to the International Classification of Disease Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes.

For this report, we included the ICD-10 codes referenced by Case and Deaton, reflecting underlying cause of death from each of the three diseases of despair: alcohol, prescription-drug, and illegal-drug overdose; suicide; and alcoholic liver disease/cirrhosis of the liver.⁷ To determine the percentage of alcohol, prescription-drug, and illegal-drug overdose deaths attributed to opioids, we used the multiple cause-of-death ICD-10 codes that specify the type of drug causing the overdose.¹² Appendix A provides the underlying cause-of-death ICD-10 codes used to identify the disease of despair, and the multiple cause-of-death ICD-10 codes that identify overdoses caused by opioids.

Analyses use age-adjusted mortality rates and focus on the population ages 15–64. However, select analyses report mortality rates by age group (10-year increments between ages 15–64). Due to changes in CDC WONDER data availability for Connecticut counties, Connecticut has been excluded from the non-Appalachian U.S. rates for all analyses involving 10-year age groups.

If the Appalachian counties in a specific state had fewer than 20 deaths, the state-specific mortality rate for that disease of despair is considered unreliable. The few instances of unreliable data are noted in the findings. This study aimed to detect differences in the mortality rates from diseases of despair between Appalachia and the non-Appalachian U.S., in addition to differences by age and sex. Statistical significance was assessed at the 0.05 level using two-sided significance tests (z-tests).

Appalachian rates were further analyzed by subregion, county economic status, and levels of rurality. Appalachian subregions represent contiguous geographies of relatively homogeneous characteristics (topography, demographics, economics, and transportation), and include the following (per Exhibit 1):

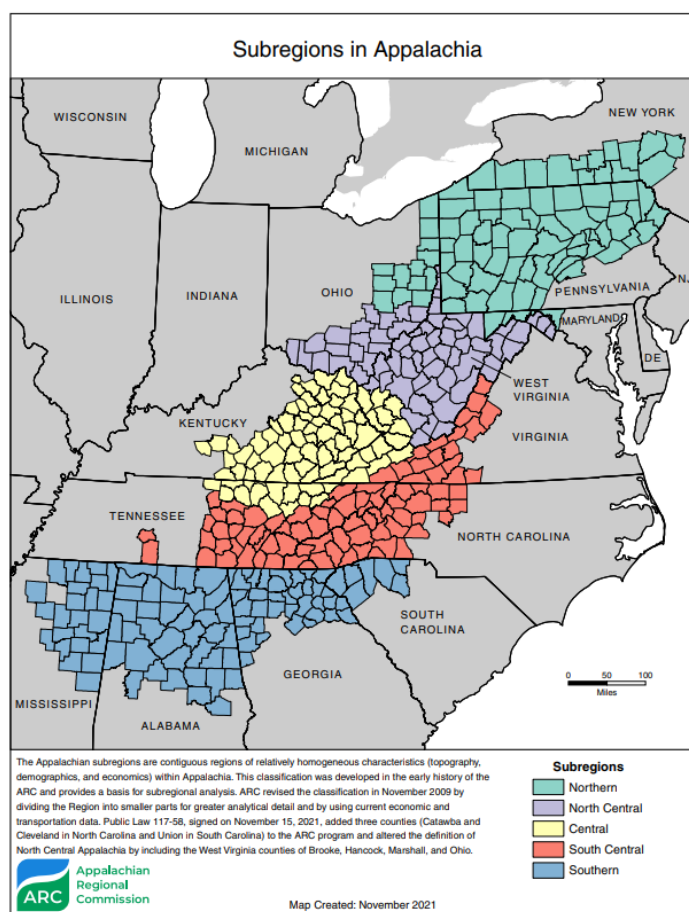
- Northern
- North Central
- Central
- South Central
- Southern

ARC's economic classifications rely on an index of three economic indicators (three-year unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate). Counties are then designated based on the index as distressed, at-risk, transitional, competitive, or attainment.¹³ For these analyses, counties were classified as distressed or non-distressed.

For rurality, we used ARC designations of “metropolitan counties” (counties that include large metropolitan centers of one million or more people, and those with metropolitan centers of less than one million residents), and “nonmetropolitan counties” (including nonmetro counties adjacent to large metropolitan areas [metros], those adjacent to small metros, and rural counties). These designations are based on a simplification of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Services 2013 Urban Influence Codes.¹⁴

Lastly, for the purposes of this report all mortality rates are per 100,000 people.

Exhibit 1. Appalachian subregions



Findings

Overall Mortality

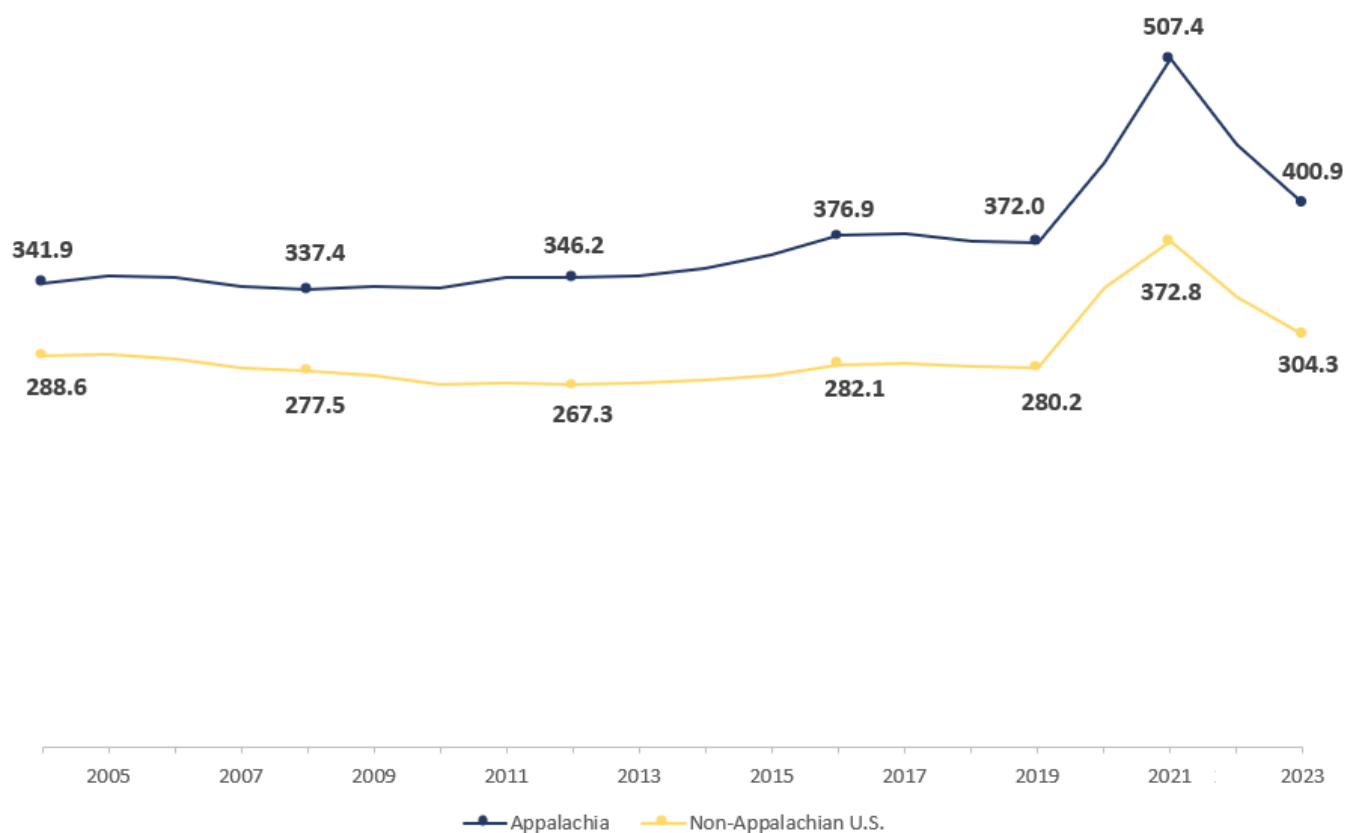
The all-cause mortality rate (overall mortality) among individuals ages 15–64 in both the Appalachian Region and non-Appalachian U.S. declined between 2004 and 2010—by 1 and 7 percent, respectively—before increasing in both geographies between 2012 and 2017 (see Exhibit 2).

From 2012–2017, the all-cause mortality rate increased by 9 percent in the Appalachian Region and 6 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. This rise both inside and outside Appalachia coincides with a surge in U.S. opioid-overdose deaths.

Between 2017 and 2018, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. saw the first decline in the all-cause mortality rate since 2011 to 2012. The all-cause mortality rate in the Appalachian Region declined from 378.8 deaths per 100,000, in 2017, to 372.6 deaths per 100,000 in 2018 (a 1.6 percent decrease). By comparison, the non-Appalachian U.S. saw a decline from 282.8 deaths per 100,000, in 2017, to 280.3 deaths per 100,000 in 2018 (a 0.9 percent decrease). These declines were likely driven by fewer drug-overdose deaths during this period.

However, between 2019 and 2021, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. saw a dramatic increase in all-cause mortality, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Appalachian Region, the all-cause mortality rate increased from 372.0 deaths per 100,000, in 2019, to 507.4 deaths per 100,000, in 2021 (a 36 percent increase). In the non-Appalachian U.S., the all-cause mortality rate increased from 280.2 deaths per 100,000, in 2019, to 372.8 deaths per 100,000, in 2021 (a 33 percent increase).

In 2022, and again in 2023, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. saw a decrease in all-cause mortality from the previous year. The Appalachian Region all-cause mortality rate decreased from 444.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2022, to 400.9 deaths per 100,000 in 2023 (a 10 percent decrease). In the non-Appalachian U.S., the all-cause mortality rate decreased from 332.3 deaths per 100,000 in 2022, to 304.3 deaths per 100,000 in 2023 (an 8.4 percent decrease). Between 2021 and 2023, the all-cause mortality rate decreased by 21 percent in the Appalachian Region and 18 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S.

Exhibit 2. All-cause annual mortality rates, ages 15–64, by region (2004–2023)^{†*}

[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

* For all years, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

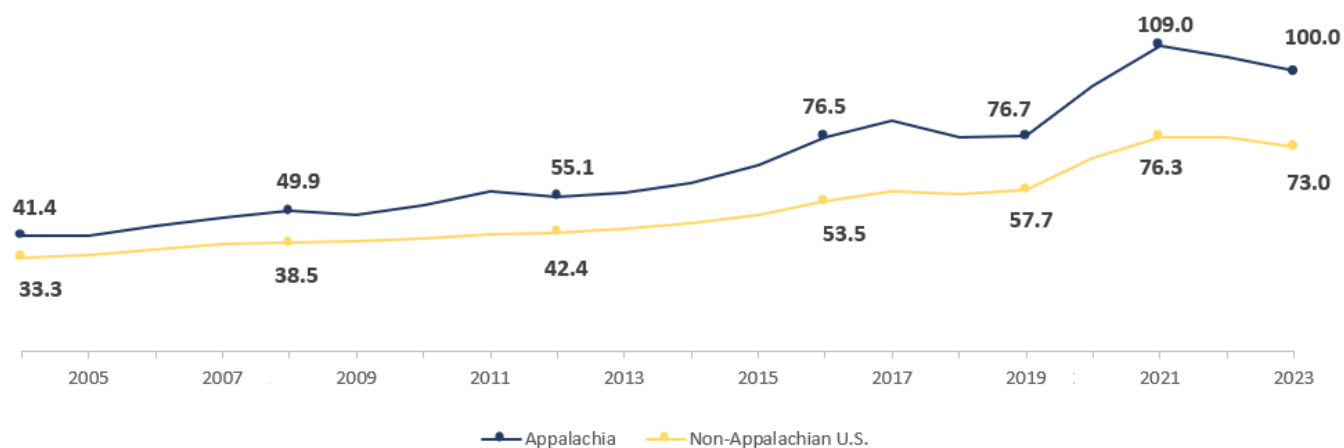
Diseases of Despair: Comparisons Between Appalachia & the Non-Appalachian United States

Exhibit 3 compares the burden from diseases of despair between the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S., from 2004 to 2023. The disparity between the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. reached its widest gap in 2017, when the diseases of despair mortality rate was 44 percent higher in Appalachia than the non-Appalachian U.S.

In 2018, the gap began to narrow, although the diseases of despair mortality rate remained 35 percent higher in the Appalachian Region than in non-Appalachia. The mortality rate among individuals ages 15–64 was 76.1 per 100,000 in Appalachia (a decline of 7.4 percent from 2017), compared to 56.2 deaths per 100,000 in the non-Appalachian U.S.

The gap between Appalachia and the non-Appalachian U.S. continued to decrease in 2019, although the diseases of despair mortality rate was still 33 percent higher in Appalachia. However, that trend reversed by 2020. Between 2019 and 2021, deaths linked to diseases of despair increased dramatically in both Appalachia and the rest of the country. In the Appalachian Region, the diseases of despair mortality rate increased by 42 percent from 2019 to 2021 (from 76.7 deaths to 109.0 deaths, per 100,000). In the non-Appalachian U.S., the rate increased by 32 percent over the same time period (from 57.7 deaths to 76.3 deaths, per 100,000). As a result, in 2021, the diseases of despair mortality rate was 43 percent higher in the Appalachian Region than in the non-Appalachian U.S.

In 2023, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. experienced an approximately 5 percent decrease in the diseases of despair mortality rate, compared to the rates in 2022. In the Appalachian Region, the diseases of despair mortality rate decreased from 105.0 deaths per 100,000 in 2022, to 100.0 deaths per 100,000 in 2023 (a decline of 4.8 percent). In the non-Appalachian U.S., the diseases of despair mortality rate decreased from 76.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2022, to 73.0 deaths per 100,000 in 2023 (a decline of 4.5 percent). Between 2021 and 2023, the diseases of despair mortality rate declined by 8.3 percent in the Appalachian Region and 4.3 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. Despite these declines, rates remain 30 percent higher in Appalachia and 27 percent higher in the non-Appalachian U.S. than the 2019 “pre-pandemic” mortality rates.

Exhibit 3. Diseases of despair annual mortality rates, ages 15–64, by region (2004–2023)^{†*}

[†]Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

^{*} For all years, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

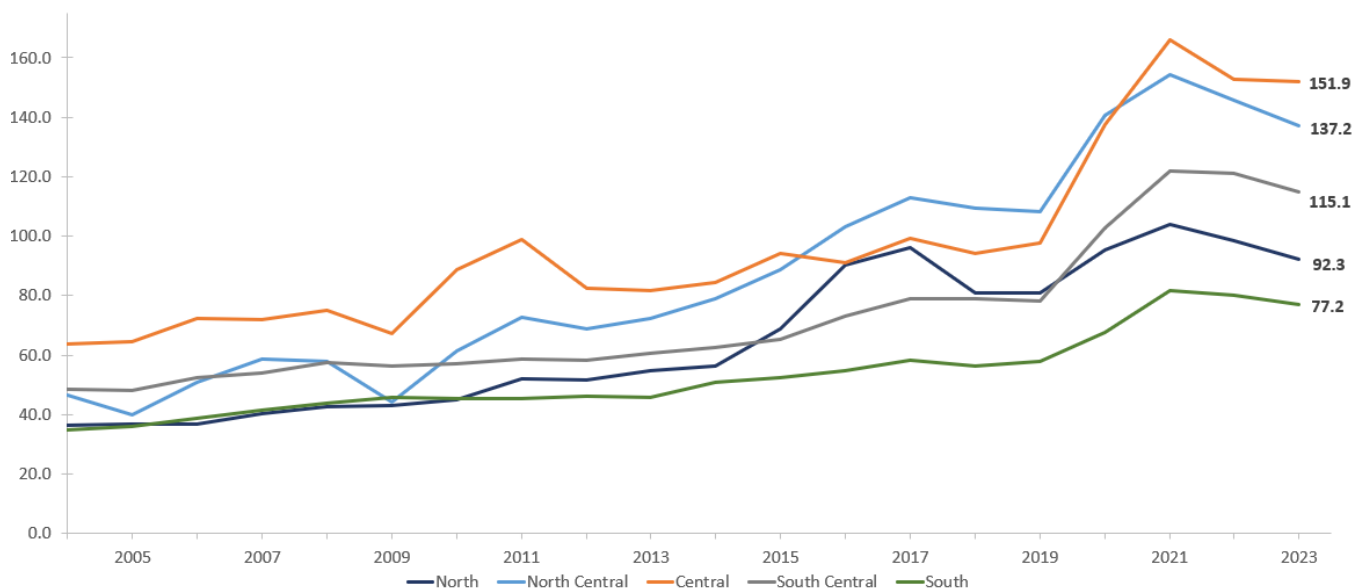
Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

After dramatic increases in diseases of despair mortality rates across all Appalachian subregions from 2019–2021, all Appalachian subregions experienced a decrease in 2022. Central Appalachia experienced the largest decrease (7.8 percent), while South Central Appalachia had the smallest decrease (0.5 percent). In 2023, all subregions experienced a continued decrease in diseases of despair mortality rates. Northern Appalachia experienced the largest decrease (6.5 percent), while Central Appalachia had the smallest decrease (0.7 percent). In 2023, the diseases of despair mortality rate was 151.9 deaths per 100,000 in Central Appalachia, and 137.2 deaths per 100,000 in North

Central Appalachia, nearly two times greater than the rate in Southern Appalachia (77.2 deaths per 100,000).

Exhibit 4 compares diseases of despair mortality rate trends from 2004 to 2023, for all five subregions.

Exhibit 4. Diseases of despair annual mortality rates, ages 15–64, by Appalachian subregion (2004–2023)[‡]



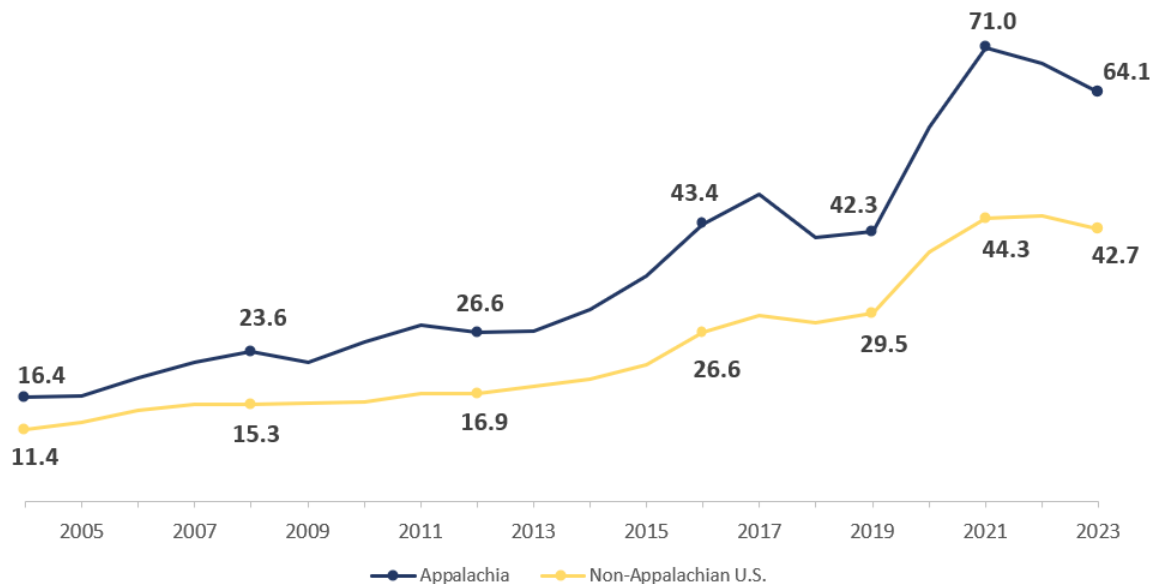
[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Below, Exhibit 5 shows the trend in overdose mortality rates from 2004 to 2023. After multiple years of steep increases in overdose mortality rates between 2013 and 2017, in 2018, both Appalachia and the non-Appalachian U.S. experienced declines in the overdose mortality rate (14 and 3.8 percent, respectively).

Between 2019 and 2021, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. reached a previously unseen number of deaths related to overdose, with both reaching their highest overdose mortality rates to date, in 2021. The overdose mortality rate increased by 68 percent in the Appalachian Region (from 42.3 to 71.0 deaths, per 100,000) and by 50 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. (from 29.5 to 44.3 deaths, per 100,000), between 2019 and 2021. In 2022, the Appalachian Region experienced a 3.5 percent decrease in overdose mortality (from 71.0 to 68.5 deaths per 100,000), while the non-Appalachian U.S. rate increased slightly from 44.3 to 44.7 deaths per 100,000. In 2023, both Appalachia and the non-Appalachian U.S. experienced a decrease in overdose mortality. The Appalachian Region experienced a 6.4 percent decrease in overdose mortality (from 68.5 to 64.1 deaths per 100,000), while the non-Appalachian U.S. experienced a 4.5 percent decrease in overdose mortality (from 44.7 to 42.7 deaths per 100,000). Since 2021, the overdose mortality rate has decreased by 10 percent in the Appalachian Region and 3.6 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S.

Exhibit 5. Overdose annual mortality rates, ages 15–64, by region (2004–2023)^{†*}



[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

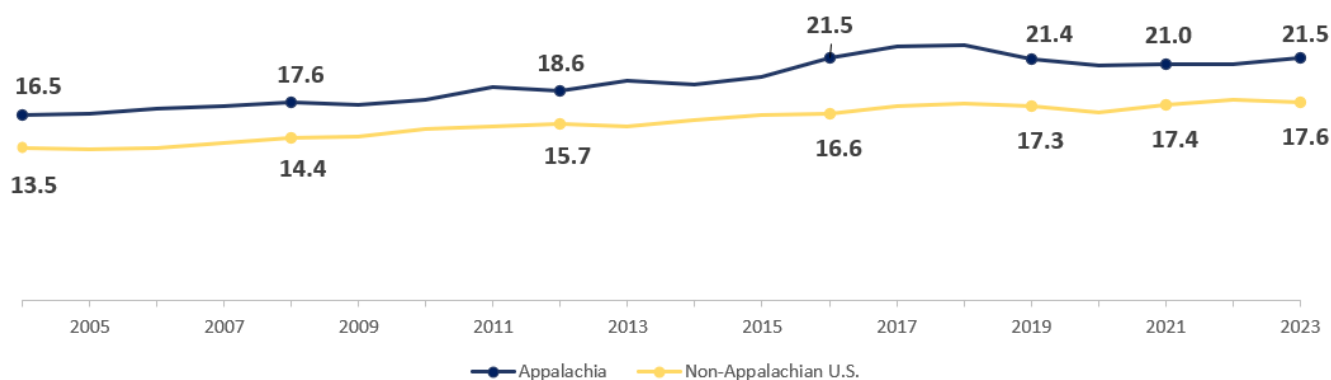
* For all years, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 6 shows the trends in suicide mortality rates both inside and outside of Appalachia, between 2004 and 2023. Every year in this timeframe showed a statistically higher suicide mortality rate in the Appalachian Region than in the non-Appalachian U.S. The suicide mortality rate in the Appalachian Region rose 38 percent between 2004 and 2018, while increasing 30 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. Between 2018 and 2020, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. saw drops in the suicide mortality rate.

However, in 2021, both Appalachia and non-Appalachia experienced increases in the suicide mortality rate of 1.0 and 4.2 percent, respectively. Between 2021 and 2023, the suicide mortality rate slightly increased in both the Appalachian Region (from 21.0 to 21.5 deaths per 100,000) and the non-Appalachian U.S. (from 17.4 to 17.6 deaths per 100,000).

Exhibit 6. Suicide annual mortality rates, ages 15–64, by region (2004–2023)^{†*}



[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

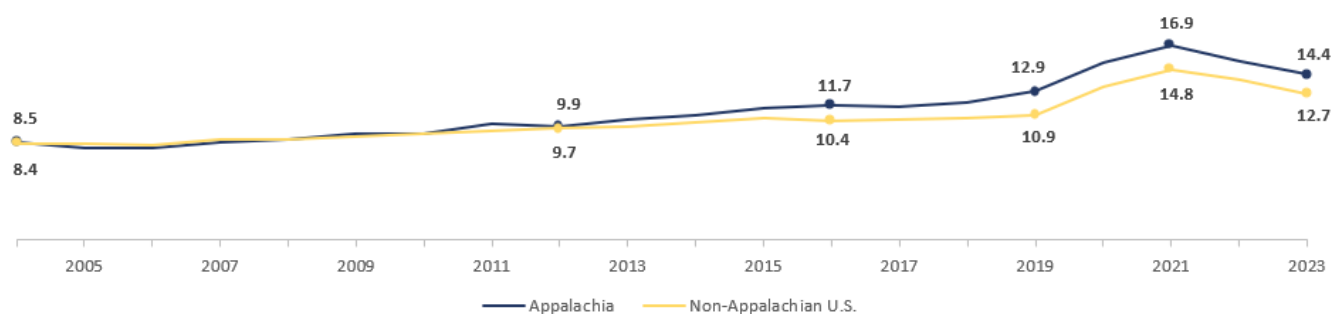
* For all years, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

As shown in Exhibit 7, the liver disease mortality rate remained relatively stable, with minimal difference between the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S., between 2004 and 2015. Between 2019 and 2021, however, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. saw an increase in the number of deaths attributable to liver disease. Between 2019 and 2021, the liver disease mortality rate increased by 31 percent in the Appalachian Region (from 12.9 deaths to 16.9 deaths, per 100,000) and by 36 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. (from 10.9 deaths to 14.8 deaths, per 100,000).

In 2022, and then again in 2023, both the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. saw year-over-year decreases in the liver disease mortality rate. Between 2021 and 2023, the Appalachian Region experienced a 15 percent decrease in liver disease mortality rate (from 16.9 to 14.4 deaths per 100,000), while the non-Appalachian U.S. experienced a 14 percent decrease (from 14.8 to 12.7 deaths per 100,000).

Exhibit 7. Liver disease annual mortality rates, ages 15–64, by region (2004–2023)^{†*}



[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

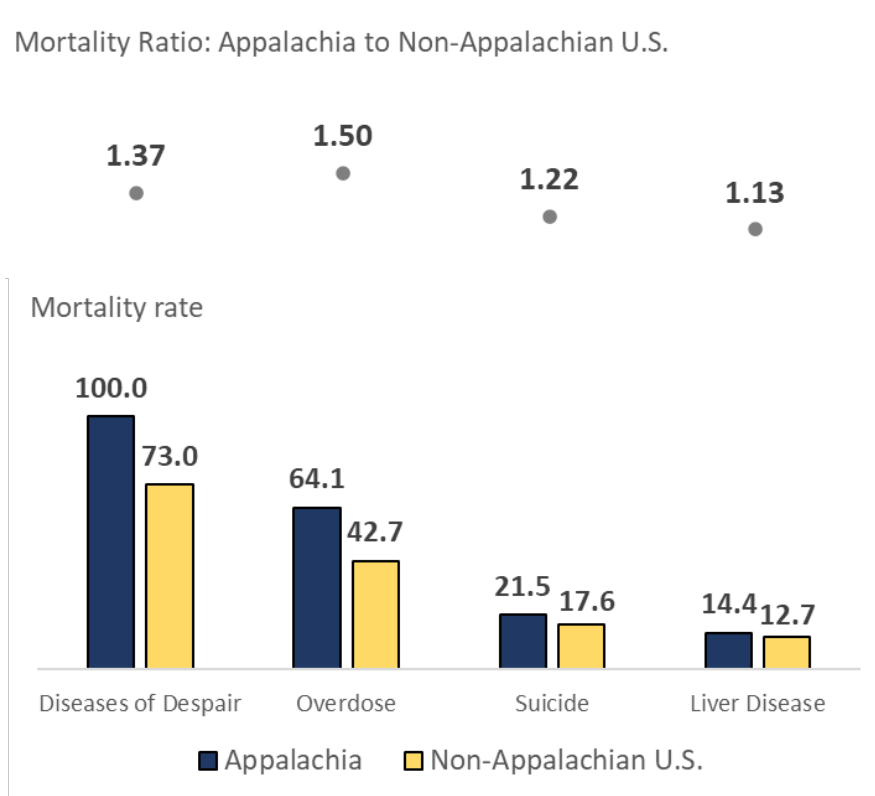
^{*} In 2005, 2011, and 2013–2023, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 8 compares the burden from each disease of despair between the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. in 2023. Among Appalachians ages 15–64, there were 10,323 deaths due to overdose, 3,568 attributed to suicide, and 2,812 attributed to alcoholic liver disease/cirrhosis. Of the three diseases of despair, overdose is the greatest contributor to the overall burden in Appalachia, and also to the divide between Appalachia and non-Appalachia; overdose mortality was 50 percent higher in the region than the rest of the nation. Specifically, there were 64.1 deaths per 100,000 attributable to overdose in the Appalachian Region compared to 42.7 deaths per 100,000 in the non-Appalachian U.S.

In addition, we found that the suicide rate was 22 percent higher—and the liver disease mortality rate was 13 percent higher—in Appalachia than the non-Appalachian U.S. All differences between the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. were statistically significant.

Exhibit 8. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by disease and region (2023)^{†*}



[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

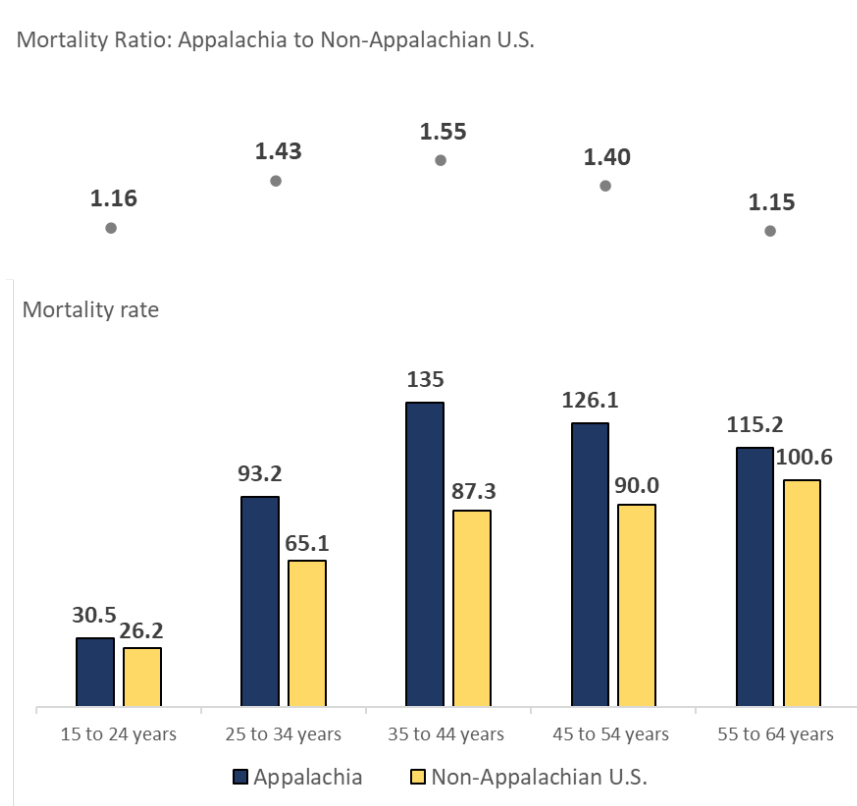
^{*} For all diseases, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Diseases of despair mortality rates also differ by age group, as shown in Exhibit 9. The Appalachian Region experienced higher rates of mortality than the non-Appalachian U.S. for all 10-year age ranges between 15 and 64. The mortality rate for the 25–34 age group was 43 percent higher in Appalachia than the non-Appalachian U.S., and the mortality rate for those ages 35–44 was 55 percent higher in Appalachia than the non-Appalachian U.S.

Across the age ranges of 25–54, the diseases of despair mortality rate was 39 percent higher in the Appalachian Region (118.5 deaths per 100,000) than in the non-Appalachian U.S. (85.5 deaths per 100,000). The 25–54 age range is important, as those individuals are considered to be in their prime working and child-rearing years, creating implications for both economic development and children’s health and well-being. While the disparity between the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. remains significant, the gap decreased in 2023, from 46 percent higher in the Appalachian Region in 2022 to 39 percent higher in 2023. For all age groups, the difference between the mortality rate in the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. was statistically significant.

Exhibit 9. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by age and region (2023)^{‡*^}



[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are crude mortality rates for each age group.

^{*} For all age groups, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

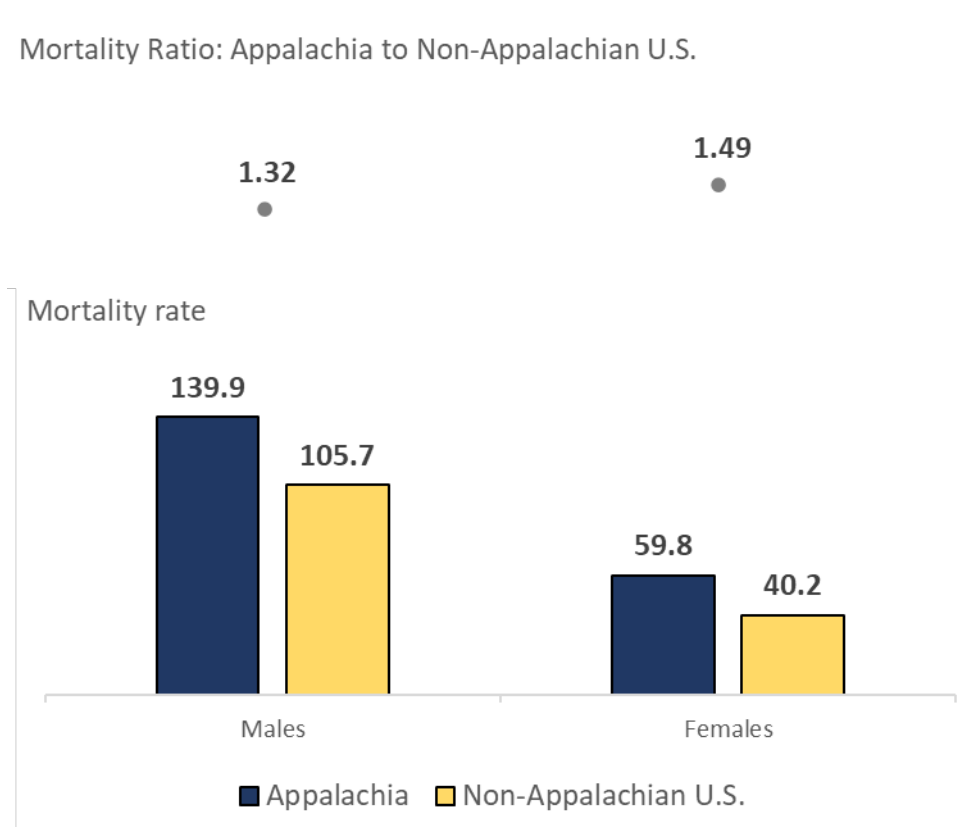
[^] Excludes Connecticut counties for non-Appalachian U.S.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

In 2023, the burden of mortality attributed to diseases of despair was higher for males than females, as shown in Exhibit 10. In Appalachia, the diseases of despair mortality rate for men ages 15–64 was more than twice that of women in the same age range (139.9 deaths per 100,000, compared to 59.8 deaths per 100,000).

However, the disparity between the Appalachian Region and non-Appalachian U.S. was greater for females. Specifically, the diseases of despair mortality rate was 49 percent higher for females and 32 percent higher for males in the Appalachian Region than in the non-Appalachian U.S.

Exhibit 10. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by sex and region (2023)^{‡*}



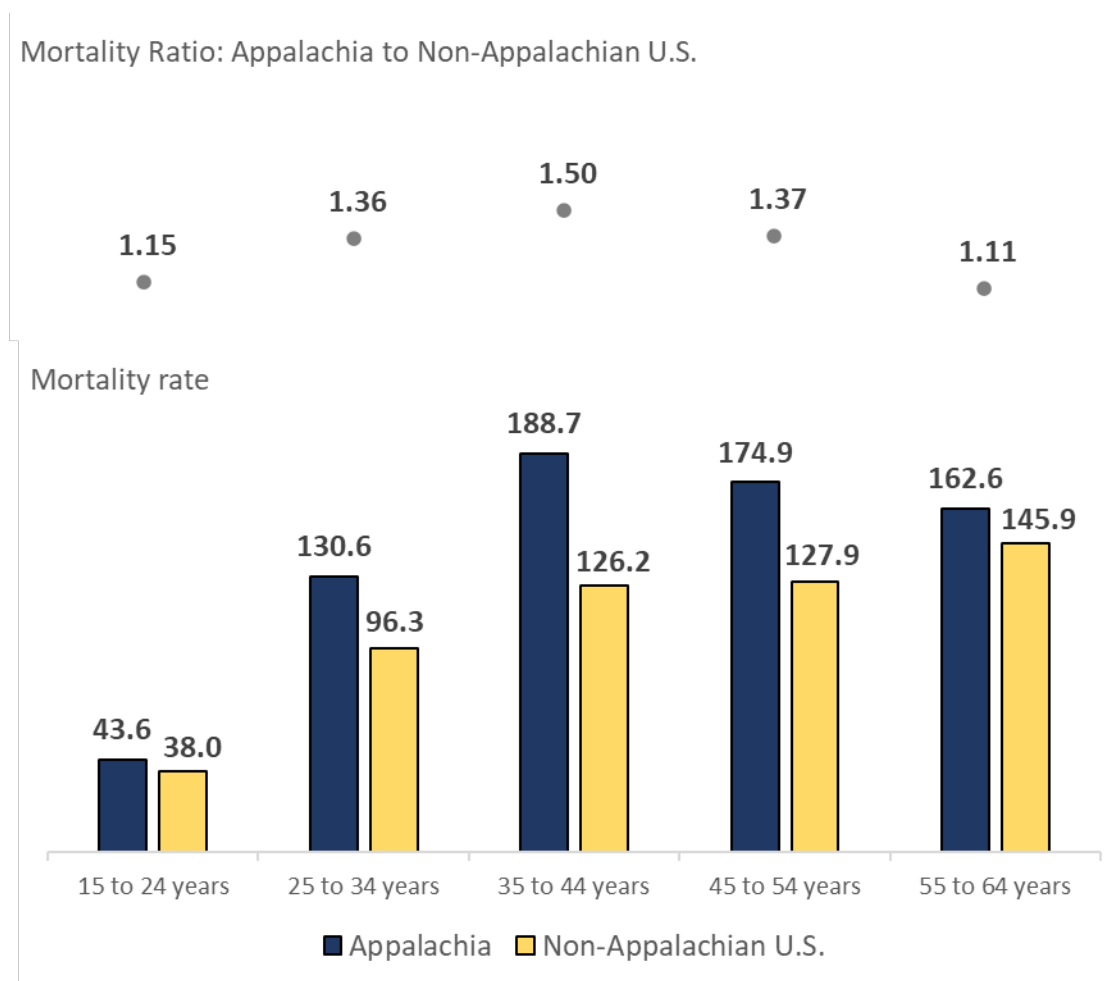
[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

^{*} For both sexes, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>

Exhibit 11 shows diseases of despair mortality for males, by 10-year age groups. Among men 35–44 years old, the diseases of despair mortality rate was 188.7 deaths per 100,000 in the Appalachian Region, which was 50 percent higher than the rate for males in the non-Appalachian U.S. (126.2 deaths per 100,000). For males of all ages, the difference between the mortality rate in the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. was statistically significant.

Exhibit 11. Diseases of despair mortality rates for males, ages 15–64, by age and region (2023)^{‡*^}



[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are crude mortality rates for each age group.

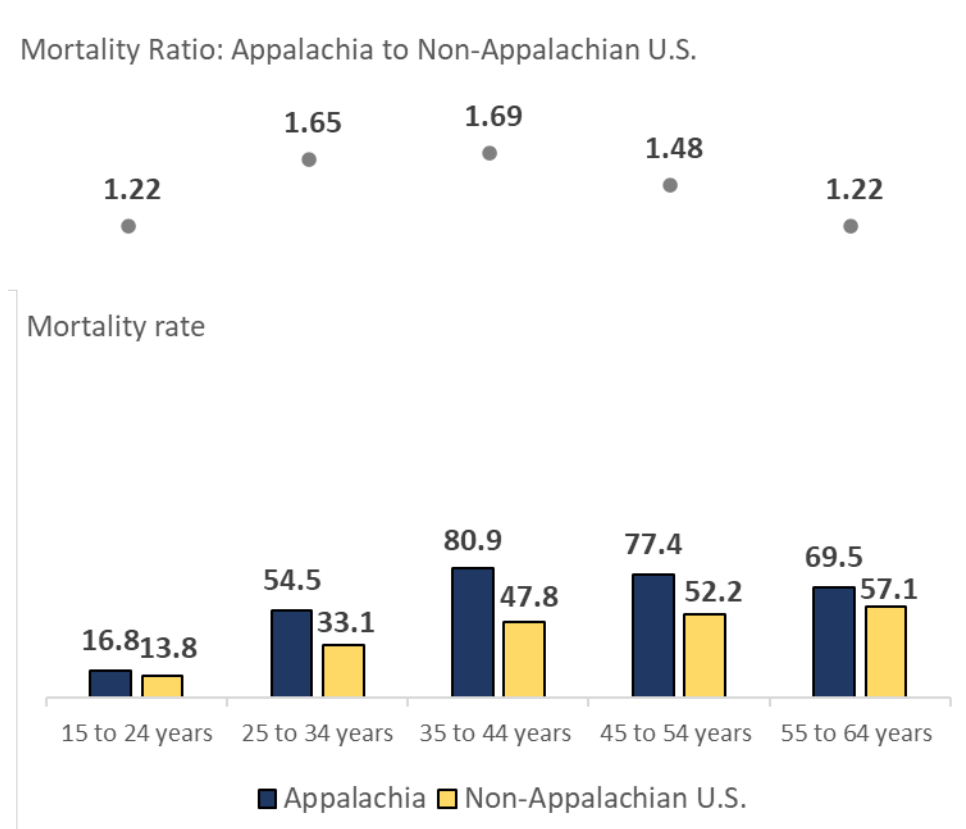
^{*} For all age groups, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

[^] Excludes Connecticut counties for non-Appalachian U.S.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 12 shows diseases of despair mortality rate for females, by 10-year age groups. While the diseases of despair mortality rates are lower for females than males, the disparity between Appalachian and non-Appalachia is greater among women. Specifically, the mortality rate was 65 percent higher for women ages 25–34 in Appalachia, and 69 percent higher for women ages 35–44, compared to females in the non-Appalachian U.S. For females of all ages, the difference between the mortality rate in the Appalachian Region and the non-Appalachian U.S. was statistically significant.

Exhibit 12. Diseases of despair mortality rates for females, ages 15–64, by age and region (2023)^{‡*}



[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are crude mortality rates for each age group.

^{*} For all age groups, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

[^] Excludes Connecticut counties for non-Appalachian U.S.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Diseases of Despair: Within-State Comparisons (Appalachia vs. Non-Appalachia)

States in the Appalachian Region experienced differences in diseases of despair mortality rates between the Appalachian and non-Appalachian parts of their state. Exhibit 13 shows the percentage difference between the mortality rates from diseases of despair in the Appalachian portion of each state, compared to the non-Appalachian portion.

Among states, Maryland exhibited the greatest disparity between its Appalachian and non-Appalachian portions, with the diseases of despair mortality rate 60 percent higher in the Appalachian part of the state. In each of Virginia, New York, Kentucky, and North Carolina, the diseases of despair mortality rate in the Appalachian portion was between 40 and 60 percent higher than the non-Appalachian portion of the state. In Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, the diseases of despair mortality rate in the Appalachian portion of each state was between 20 and 40 percent higher than in the non-Appalachian portion.

Mississippi and Georgia were the only states in which non-Appalachian counties had a higher mortality rate from diseases of despair; however, for Georgia, the difference was not statistically significant. In states where the diseases of despair mortality rate was higher in the Appalachian portion of the state, the difference was statistically significant (with the exception of South Carolina, where the difference was not statistically significant).

West Virginia is not included in this analysis as the entire state is located in the Appalachian Region.

Exhibit 13. Diseases of despair mortality rates, comparing Appalachian and non-Appalachian portions of states, ages 15–64, by disease and state (2023)^{‡*}

	Diseases of Despair–Total		
	Appalachia (App)	Non-Appalachia (Non-App)	% Difference
Maryland	118.0	73.9	60%
Virginia	101.5	64.2	58%
New York	92.9	59.4	56%
Kentucky	140.5	94.6	49%
North Carolina	104.3	72.6	44%
Tennessee	131.2	97.1	35%
Alabama	90.6	70.0	29%
Ohio	110.8	87.0	27%
Pennsylvania	88.2	71.4	24%
South Carolina	95.1	90.2	5%
Georgia	60.9	63.9	-5%
Mississippi	62.6	71.2	-12%
West Virginia	159.0	N/A	N/A

[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

^{*} For all states, with the exception of Georgia and South Carolina, the Appalachian rate is significantly different than the non-Appalachian rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

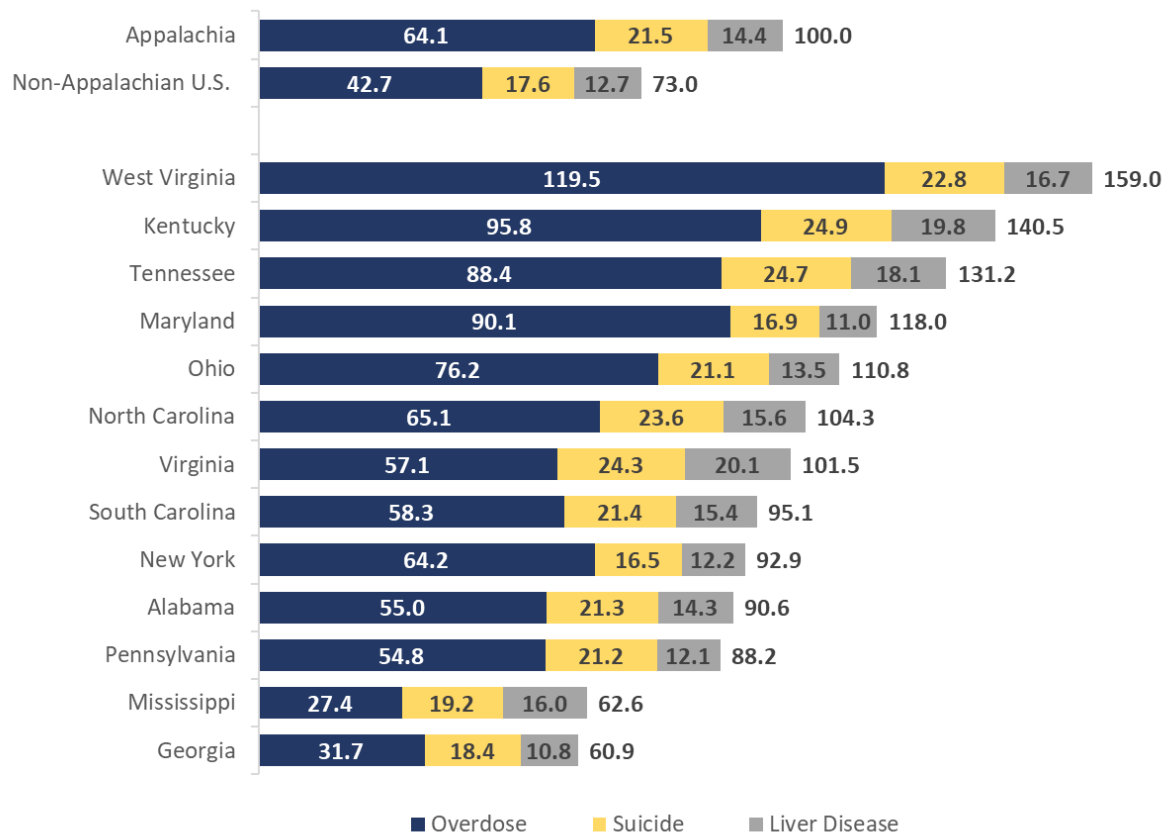
Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Diseases of Despair: Disparities Within Appalachia

Within Appalachia, diseases of despair burden varies widely. The following findings describe the disparities within the Appalachian Region by state, subregion, county economic status, and rurality.

Exhibits 14 and 15 show the mortality rates for each individual disease of despair for the Appalachian portions of each state. For all diseases of despair combined, West Virginia and Appalachian Kentucky had the highest mortality rates across Appalachian states, at 159.0 and 140.5 deaths per 100,000, respectively. In West Virginia and the Appalachian portion of Maryland, at least 75 percent of diseases of despair deaths were due to overdose. Appalachian Georgia and Appalachian Mississippi not only had the lowest combined mortality rates from diseases of despair, but they were the only states with rates lower than the overall non-Appalachian U.S. rate.

Exhibit 14. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by state[^] and disease (2023)[‡]



[^] For states within Appalachia, only the mortality rate for the Appalachian counties is shown.

[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 15. Individual diseases of despair mortality rates, comparing Appalachian and non-Appalachian portions of states, ages 15–64, by disease and state (2023)[‡]

	Overdose		Suicide		Alcoholic Liver Disease/Cirrhosis	
	App	Non-App	App	Non-App	App	Non-App
Alabama	55.0*	37.0	21.3	19.8	14.3	13.1
Georgia	31.7*	34.3	18.4	18.8	10.8	10.8
Kentucky	95.8*	60.1	24.9*	20.6	19.8*	13.9
Maryland	90.1*	53.7	16.9	11.7	11.0	8.6
Mississippi	27.4*	39.3	19.2	19.0	16.0	12.9
New York	64.2*	42.0	16.5*	10.2	12.2*	7.2
North Carolina	65.1*	44.1	23.6*	16.8	15.6*	11.8
Ohio	76.2*	55.7	21.1	18.4	13.5	12.9
Pennsylvania	54.8*	48.7	21.2*	15.8	12.1*	6.9
South Carolina	58.3	58.4	21.4*	17.8	15.4	14.0
Tennessee	88.4*	65.5	24.7*	19.5	18.1*	12.1
Virginia	57.1*	38.9	24.3*	16.2	20.1*	9.1
West Virginia	119.5	N/A	22.8	N/A	16.7	N/A

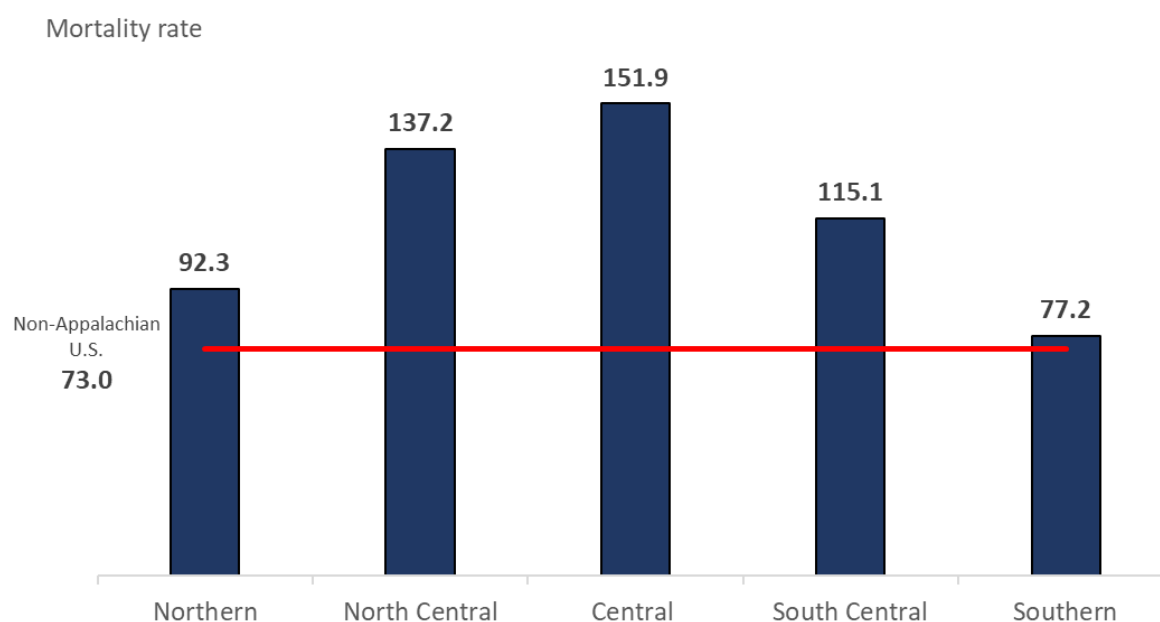
[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

* The Appalachian rate is significantly different than the non-Appalachian rate for the same disease, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

As shown in Exhibit 16, in 2023, the greatest burden of diseases of despair within Appalachia was concentrated in Central Appalachia, which had a mortality rate of 151.9 deaths per 100,000. The next three highest burdens belonged to North Central (137.2 deaths per 100,000), South Central (115.1 deaths per 100,000), and Northern Appalachia (92.3 deaths per 100,000). While Southern Appalachia continued to have the lowest mortality rate for diseases of despair, with 77.2 deaths per 100,000, in 2023, the rate still surpassed that of the non-Appalachian U.S. (73.0 deaths per 100,000). In 2023, all Appalachian subregions had diseases of despair mortality rates higher than that of the non-Appalachian U.S.

Exhibit 16. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by subregion (2023)[‡]



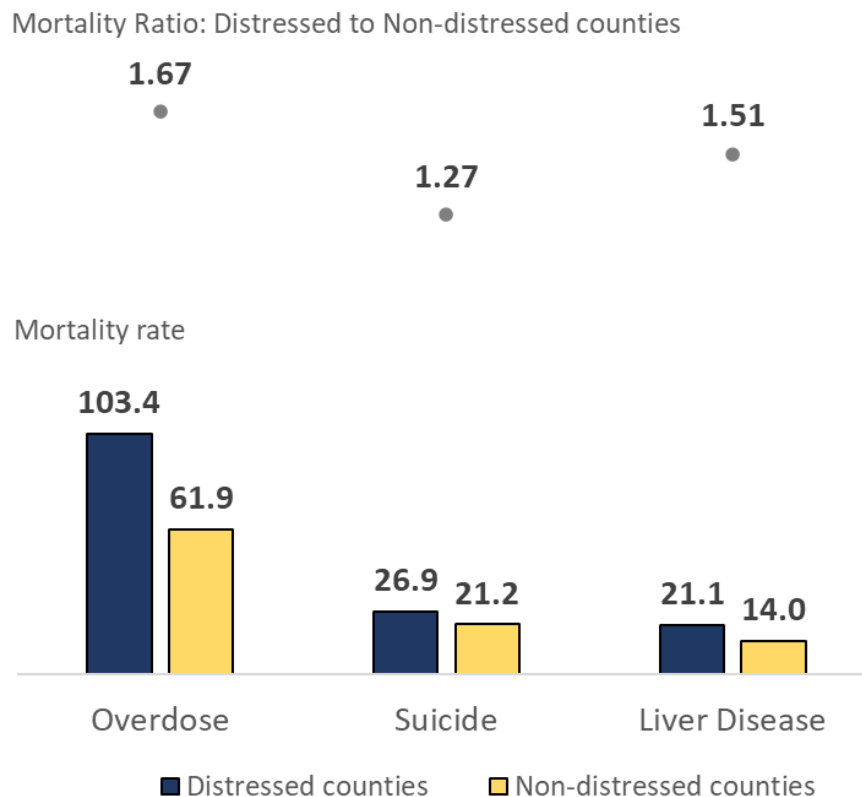
[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 17 shows the mortality rate for each individual disease of despair, comparing distressed and non-distressed counties in the Appalachian Region. In 2023, the greatest disparities were observed for overdose deaths, which were 67 percent higher in distressed counties as compared to non-distressed counties, which was an increase from 56 percent higher in 2022.

Disparities were also seen for suicide and alcoholic liver disease/cirrhosis, which were 27 and 51 percent higher, respectively, in distressed counties than in non-distressed counties. The disparity for suicide between distressed and non-distressed counties grew in 2023 (an increase from 15 percent higher in 2022 to 27 percent higher in 2023). The difference between distressed and non-distressed counties was statistically significant for all three individual diseases of despair.

Exhibit 17. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by disease and county economic status (2023)[‡]



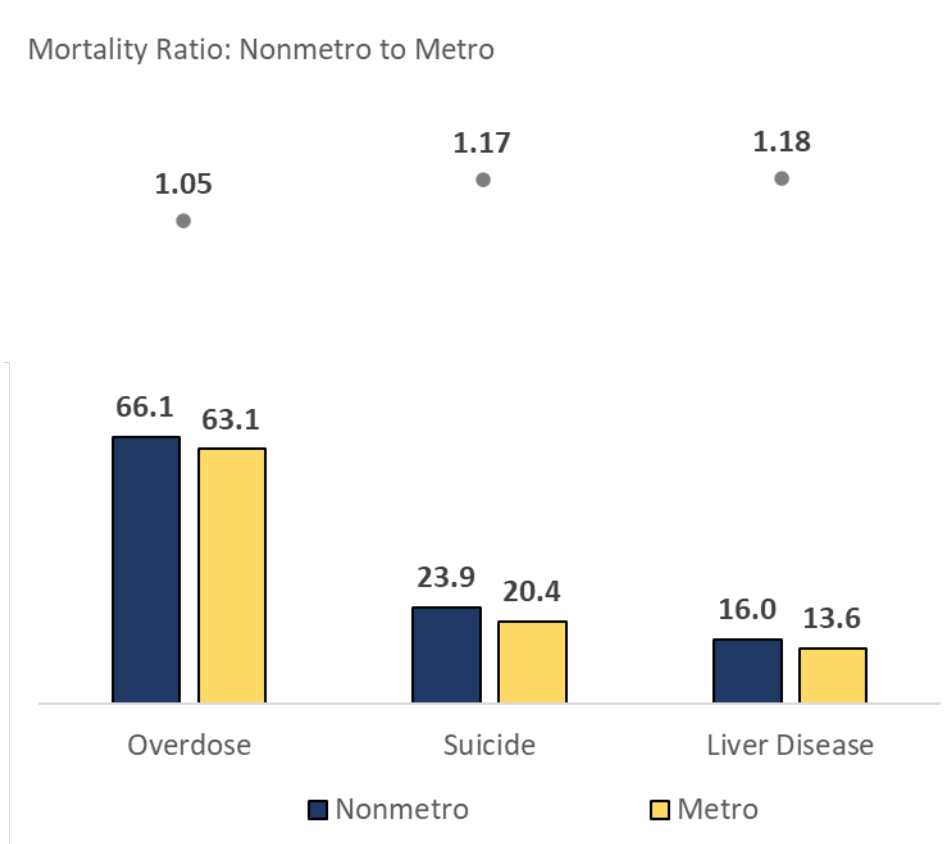
[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

* The rate for distressed counties is significantly different from the rate for non-distressed counties, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Findings also varied based on rurality, as shown in Exhibit 18. In nonmetro counties, the overdose mortality rate was 4.8 percent higher, the suicide rate was 17 percent higher, and the alcoholic liver disease/cirrhosis mortality rate was 18 percent higher than in metro counties. These differences were all statistically significant.

Exhibit 18. Diseases of despair mortality rates, ages 15–64, by disease and rurality (2023)^{†*}



[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

* The rate for nonmetro counties is significantly different from the rate for metro counties, $p \leq 0.05$.

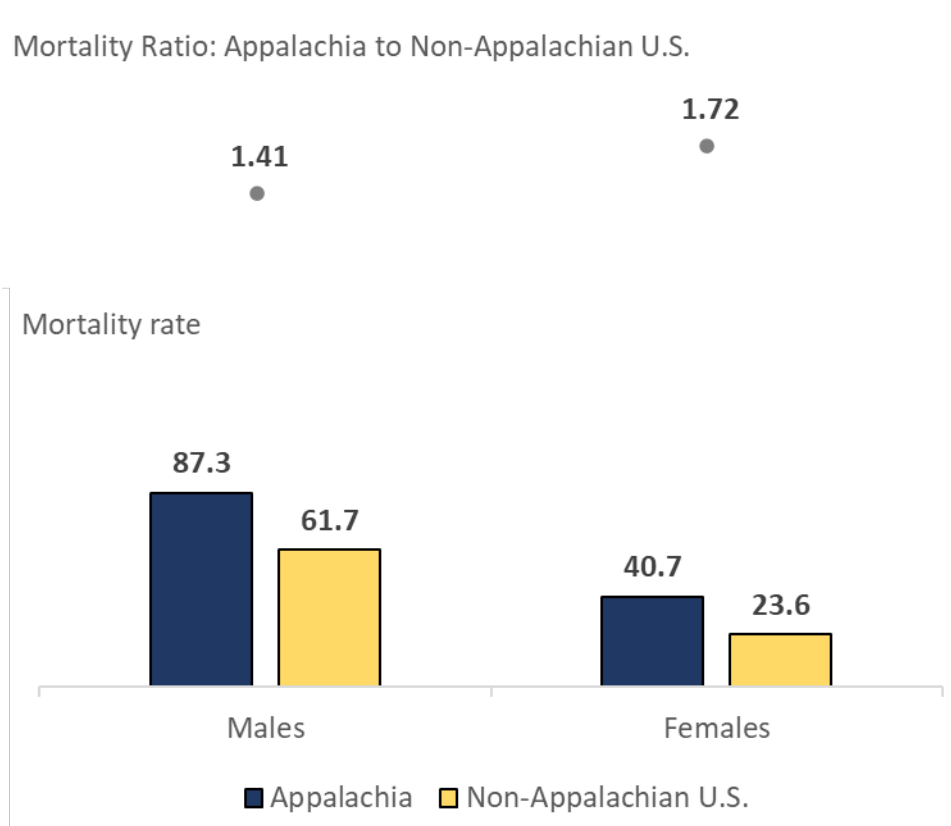
Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

A Closer Look at Overdose Deaths

The remaining findings focus solely on deaths due to alcohol, prescription-drug, and illegal-drug overdose (overdose deaths). Among individuals ages 25–54—traditionally considered to be in their prime working and child-rearing years—the overdose mortality rate was 52 percent higher in the Appalachian Region (76.9 deaths per 100,000) than in the non-Appalachian U.S. (50.7 deaths per 100,000).

Exhibit 19 shows the differences in overdose mortality between the Appalachian Region and non-Appalachian U.S. for males and females. While the burden associated with overdose mortality is higher among men (87.3 deaths per 100,000 in Appalachia, compared to 61.7 deaths per 100,000 outside of the region), the disparity is greater for women in the region. Specifically, while the overdose mortality rate in the Appalachian Region among males is 41 percent higher than in the non-Appalachian U.S., the rate is 72 percent higher for Appalachian females compared to non-Appalachian females.

Exhibit 19. Overdose mortality rates, ages 15–64, by sex and region (2023)^{‡*}



[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

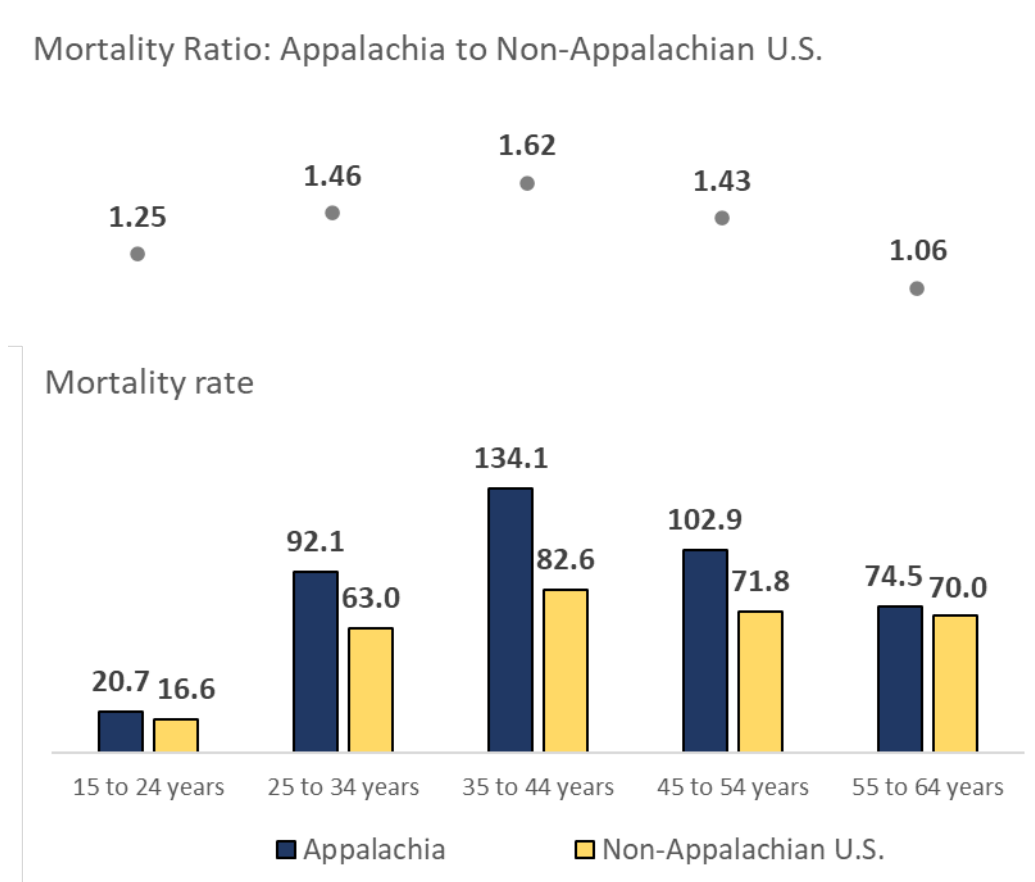
^{*} For both sexes, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Men in Appalachia who were ages 25–54 experienced notable disparities compared to non-Appalachian males, as shown in Exhibit 20. In Appalachia, compared to the rest of the country, the overdose mortality rate was 46 percent higher for males ages 25–34, 62 percent higher for males ages 35–44, and 43 percent higher for males ages 45–54. The region's burden was highest for the 35–44 age group, at 134.1 deaths per 100,000.

For Appalachian males ages 25–54, the overdose mortality rate (105.1 deaths per 100,000) was 43 percent higher than the overdose mortality rate for men outside of the region (73.7 deaths per 100,000). This represents a narrowing of the gap between the Appalachian Region and non-Appalachian U.S. from 2022 to 2023, as Appalachian males ages 25–54 had an overdose mortality rate 54 percent higher than men outside of the region in 2022. For all male age groups, the overdose mortality rate in the Appalachian Region was higher than the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, and the difference was statistically significant.

Exhibit 20. Overdose mortality rates for males, ages 15–64, by age group and region (2023) ^{†*}[^]



[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are crude mortality rates for each age group.

^{*} The Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

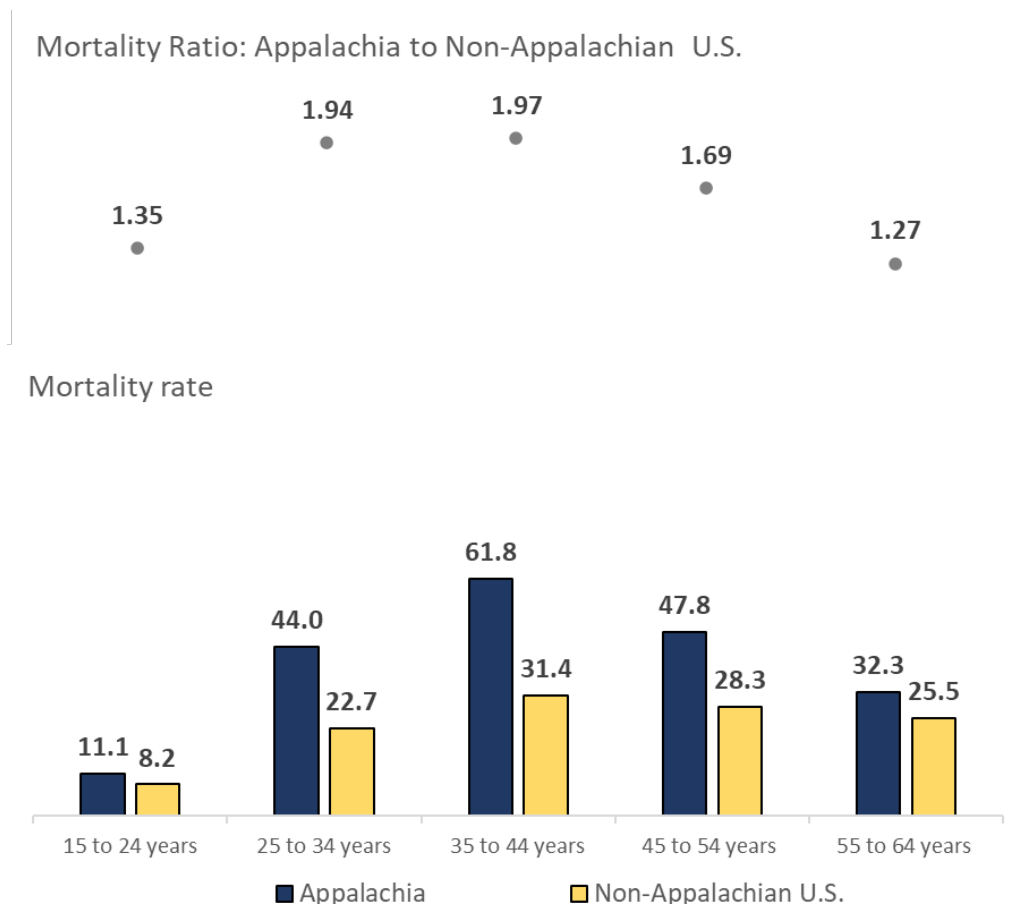
[^] Excludes Connecticut counties for non-Appalachian U.S.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

While the overall overdose mortality burden was lower among females than males, the disparity between females in Appalachia and females outside of the region was even greater than the disparity among men, as shown in Exhibit 21.

Among 35- to 44-year-olds, the Appalachian rate was 97 percent higher, with the highest overdose mortality rate being among females in that age range (61.8 deaths per 100,000). For females ages 25–54, the overdose mortality rate was 75 percent higher in the Appalachian Region (48.6 deaths per 100,000) than in the non-Appalachian U.S. (27.7 deaths per 100,000), a narrowing of the gap compared to 2022, when Appalachian females ages 25–54 had an overdose mortality rate 81 percent higher than the females outside of the region. For all female age groups, the overdose mortality rate in the Appalachian Region was higher than the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, and the difference was statistically significant.

Exhibit 21. Overdose mortality rates for females, ages 15–64, by age group and region (2023)^{†*}[^]



[†]Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are crude mortality rates for each age group.

^{*} For all age groups, the Appalachian rate is significantly different from the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

[^] Excludes Connecticut counties for non-Appalachian U.S.

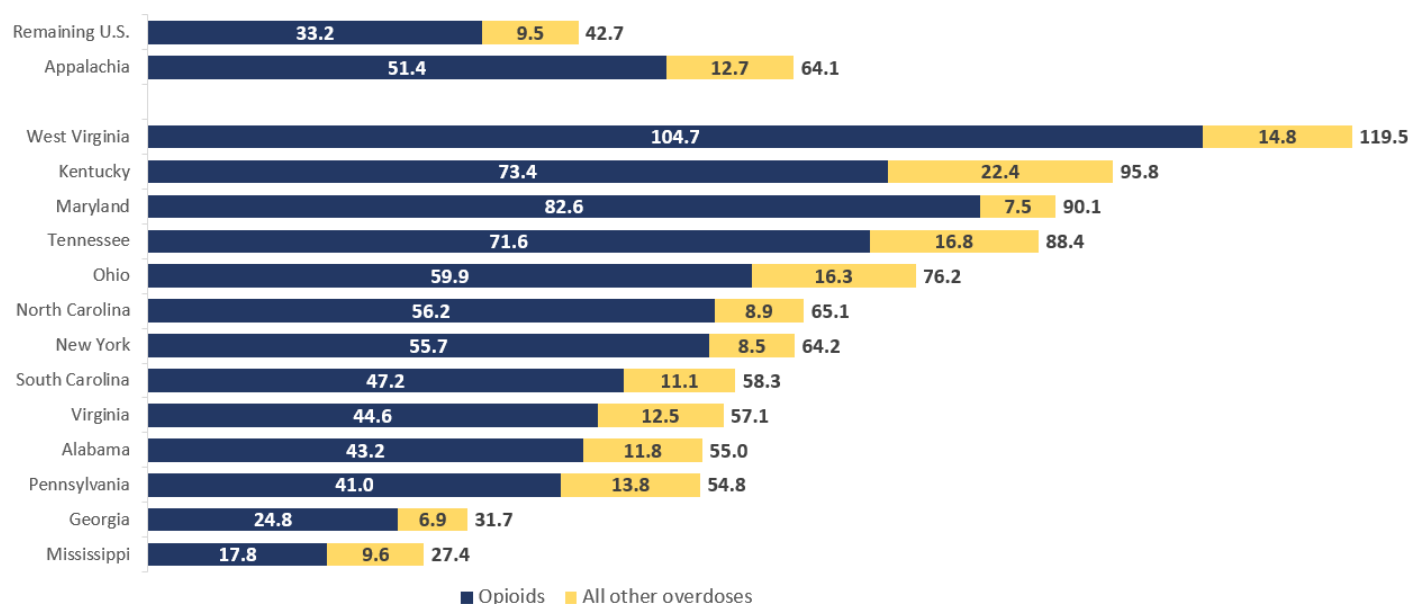
Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 22 shows the opioid-related overdose mortality rates plus the “all other” overdose mortality rates in the Appalachian portions of each state. In 2023, 8,191 of the 10,323 overdose deaths (79 percent) in the Appalachian Region were attributed to opioids.

The states with the highest opioid-related overdose mortality rates within their Appalachian counties were West Virginia (104.7 deaths per 100,000), Maryland (82.6 deaths per 100,000), Kentucky (73.4 deaths per 100,000), and Tennessee (71.6 deaths per 100,000). The states with the highest percentages of overdose deaths attributed to opioids within their Appalachian portions were Maryland (92 percent), West Virginia (88 percent), New York (87 percent), North Carolina (86 percent), Tennessee (81 percent), and South Carolina (81 percent).

Opioid-related overdose mortality rates were lowest in the Appalachian portions of Mississippi (17.8 deaths per 100,000) and Georgia (24.8 deaths per 100,000).

Exhibit 22. Overdose mortality rates, ages 15–64, by state[^] and type of overdose (2023)[‡]



[^] For states within Appalachia, only the mortality rates for the Appalachian counties are shown.

[‡] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

[†] Due to a small number of deaths, the opioid mortality rate is unreliable and not age-adjusted.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Exhibit 23 shows the percentages of overdose deaths attributed to opioids in each state, as well as the opioid-related overdose mortality rate. The opioid-related mortality rate was 51.4 deaths per 100,000 in the Appalachian Region, which was 55 percent higher than the non-Appalachian U.S. rate of 33.2 deaths per 100,000.

Exhibit 23. Overdose and opioid-related overdose mortality rates, age 15–64, by state[^] (2023)^{*}

	Overdose	Opioid-related Overdose	Opioid-related (%)
Alabama	55.0	43.2	79%
Georgia	31.7	24.8	78%
Kentucky	95.8	73.4	77%
Maryland	90.1	82.6	92%
Mississippi[†]	27.4	17.8	65%
New York	64.2	55.7	87%
North Carolina	65.1	56.2	86%
Ohio	76.2	59.9	79%
Pennsylvania	54.8	41.0	75%
South Carolina	58.3	47.2	81%
Tennessee	88.4	71.6	81%
Virginia	57.1	44.6	78%
West Virginia	119.5	104.7	88%
Appalachia	64.1	51.4	80%
Non-Appalachian U.S.	42.7	33.2	78%

[^] For states within Appalachia, only the mortality rate for the Appalachian counties is shown.

[†] Rates are presented as deaths per 100,000 population, and are age-adjusted.

^{*} For all states, rate is significantly different than the non-Appalachian U.S. rate, $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Mortality Rates and Standard Errors provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

Discussion

This report provides an update on trends in diseases of despair mortality in the Appalachian Region. Diseases of despair mortality had begun to decline between 2017 and 2018 before surging dramatically in 2020 and 2021, likely due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, the diseases of despair mortality rate increased by 42 percent in the Appalachian Region and 32 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. Between 2021 and 2023, the diseases of despair mortality declined by 8.3 percent in the Appalachian Region and 4.3 percent in the non-Appalachian U.S. Despite the faster rate of decline in the Appalachian Region, the diseases of despair mortality rate remained 37 percent higher in the Appalachian Region than the non-Appalachian U.S. Additionally, while the rates have started to decline since their peak in 2021, they remain 30 percent higher in Appalachia and 27 percent higher in the non-Appalachian U.S. than the 2019 “pre-pandemic” mortality rates.

In exploring the individual diseases of despair mortality rates, the region’s overdose rate was 50 percent higher, the suicide rate was 22 percent higher, and the liver disease/cirrhosis rate was 13 percent higher than in the non-Appalachian U.S. in 2023. More detailed analyses of opioid-related overdose deaths showed that in 2023, opioids caused 79 percent of overdose deaths in Appalachia (8,191 total deaths).

Compared to the rest of the nation, the Appalachian Region experienced higher rates of mortality from diseases of despair for all 10-year age ranges between ages 15 and 64. The most notable disparities existed for the 35–44 age group, individuals in their prime working and child-rearing years. More specifically, this age bracket experienced mortality rates that were 55 percent higher in Appalachia. These findings have significant implications, particularly in terms of economic development and children’s health and well-being.

Within Appalachia, all subregions saw a notable increase in diseases of despair mortality between 2019 and 2021; however, all subregions experienced a decrease between 2021 and 2023. In 2023, Central and North Central Appalachia had the highest diseases of despair mortality rates, at 151.9 deaths and 137.2 deaths per 100,000, respectively. Between 2021 and 2023, Northern and North Central Appalachia saw an 11 percent decrease in diseases of despair mortality, and Central Appalachia saw an 8 percent decrease.

Within Appalachia, economically distressed counties continue to have higher mortality rates than non-distressed counties for all three causes of death: overdose, suicide, and liver disease/cirrhosis. For both overdose and suicide, the disparity between distressed Appalachian counties and non-distressed Appalachian counties grew between 2022 and 2023. In 2023, the overdose mortality rate was 67 percent higher in distressed Appalachian counties, compared to 56 percent higher for distressed counties in 2022. For suicide, the mortality rate was 27 percent higher in distressed counties than non-distressed counties in 2023, an increase from 15 percent higher in 2022.

In 2023, nonmetro counties had higher mortality rates for all three causes of death: overdose, suicide, and liver disease/cirrhosis. For suicide and liver diseases, the mortality rate was 17 and 18 percent higher, respectively, in nonmetro than metro counties. For overdose, the mortality rate was 5 percent higher in nonmetro counties than metro counties.

In sum, the overall diseases of despair mortality rates appear to have peaked or plateaued in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this follows dramatic increases between 2019 and 2021. Between 2021 and 2023, the Appalachian Region experienced a continuous decline in overdose and liver disease/cirrhosis mortality rates (10 and 15 percent respectively). During this time, the suicide mortality rates have not changed notably. Despite the overall declines since 2021, the overall diseases of despair mortality rates in 2023 were 30 percent higher in the Appalachian Region and 27 percent higher in the non-Appalachian U.S. than the “pre-pandemic” year of 2019, when declines had occurred following the previous peak in 2017.

These data continue to demonstrate the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic *beyond* the deaths directly attributable to COVID-19. Like the rest of the United States, the Appalachian Region experienced economic and other challenges as a result of the pandemic—including the increased isolation of its populace, and limitations on access to in-person treatment and recovery support—that likely exacerbated deaths due to diseases of despair. While the data continues to highlight lasting impacts, the Appalachian Region has experienced a decline in the diseases of despair mortality rate since the peak in 2021. The 2023 data continue to demonstrate that the Appalachian Region is rebounding more quickly than the non-Appalachian U.S., despite the continued disparity and higher mortality rates in the region.

Appendix A: ICD-10 Codes

Exhibit 24. Underlying cause of death—ICD-10 codes for diseases of despair

Diseases of Despair	ICD-10 Code	Underlying Cause of Death
Alcoholic poisoning and overdoses of prescription and illegal drugs (Overdose)	X40-45	Accidental poisoning by and exposure to: nonopioid analgesics, antipyretics, and antirheumatics; antiepileptic, sedative-hypnotic, antiparkinsonism, and psychotropic drugs; narcotics and psychodysleptics [hallucinogens]; other drugs acting on the autonomic nervous system; other and unspecified drugs, medicaments, and biological substances; and alcohol
	Y10-15	Poisoning by and exposure to the following (undetermined intent): nonopioid analgesics, antipyretics and antirheumatics, undetermined intent; antiepileptic, sedative-hypnotic, antiparkinsonism and psychotropic drugs; narcotics and psychodysleptics [hallucinogens]; other drugs acting on the autonomic nervous system; other and unspecified drugs, medicaments and biological substances; and alcohol
	Y45	Analgesics, antipyretics, and anti-inflammatory drugs
	Y47	Sedatives, hypnotics, and antianxiety drugs
	Y49	Psychotropic drugs, not elsewhere classified
Suicide	X60-84	Intentional self-harm
	Y87.0	Sequelae of intentional self-harm
Alcoholic liver disease/cirrhosis	K70	Alcoholic liver disease
	K73	Chronic hepatitis, not elsewhere classified
	K74	Fibrosis and cirrhosis of liver

Exhibit 25. Multiple causes of death—ICD-10 codes for opioid-related overdose

Disease of Despair	ICD-10 Code	Multiple Causes of Death
Alcoholic poisoning and overdoses of prescription and illegal drugs (Overdose)	T40.0	Opium
	T40.1	Heroin
	T40.2	Other opioids
	T40.3	Methadone
	T40.4	Other synthetic narcotics
	T40.6	Other, and unspecified, narcotics

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