



EDITORIAL

# Health Issues in Ohio

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Published July 17, 2024 <https://doi.org/10.18061/ojph.v6i2.9974>

I am very happy to introduce myself as the next editor of the *Ohio Journal of Public Health (OJPH)*. I am very grateful for the opportunity given to me by the Ohio Public Health Association. I am also very appreciative of the work Sheryl Chatfield has put into the journal and in establishing it within the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#). I am excited about the future of the journal and to build upon the foundation laid by Dr. Chatfield. I envision the journal providing important insight into the health and well-being of the people in Ohio and providing guidance for public health practitioners in their work to improve people's lives. Coming off the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many issues are likely to impact the health of Ohioans.

While it seems that COVID-19 is no longer on the minds of many Ohioans, the disease is still present within the state. Since the beginning of 2024 there have been 91 786 cases of COVID-19 within the state, with 3365 being hospitalized and 598 deaths.<sup>1</sup> While this is a fraction of what was seen during the first year of the pandemic, it still highlights the presence of the disease and that it is the fourth leading cause of death in the state.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, long COVID (the continuation or development of new symptoms 3 months after the initial SARS-CoV-2 infection, with these symptoms lasting for at least 2 months with no other explanation) is a problem that many Ohioans are reporting. Data from the US Census Bureau found that approximately 30% of Ohio people report long COVID symptoms.<sup>3</sup> Nationally, race/ethnic minorities, along with sexual and gender minorities, have reported suffering from long COVID.<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 is not finished with Ohio, and with only 12% of Ohio having updated vaccines, COVID-19 will continue to be a problem within the state.

The election in November 2023 led to the passage of Ohio Issue 2, which led to the legalization of recreational marijuana in the state, making Ohio the 24<sup>th</sup> state to do so. This change can potentially lead to public health issues within the state. Examples include increased risk for accidents due to cannabis use as well as accidental ingestion of cannabis edibles. Studies examining motor vehicle accidents found some evidence of harm due to driving while high; these effects were inconsistent.<sup>5-7</sup> One aspect that should be of concern is the rise of accidental poisoning by adults, children, and pets ingesting cannabis edibles. A systemic review found that acute cannabis poisonings increased after the legalization of cannabis.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the legalization of recreational cannabis has led to an increase in the use by adults but not that of adolescents.<sup>9</sup> Additional questions exist regarding recreational cannabis' impact on other substances (tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs). Given Ohio's history with opiate usage and outcomes, attention to the impact of recreational cannabis is warranted.

Ohio continues to experience problems related to opiate use and overdose.<sup>10</sup> Ohio is not alone in the opiate epidemic, and the amount of fentanyl available is impacting overdose rates across the country.<sup>11</sup> The opiate problem is but one problem in what is referred to as "Disorders of Despair," as drug overdose, suicides, and alcohol-related liver diseases are related to people's poor economic and social conditions. In the past, discussions about disorders of despair were focused on the lives of White men and women; however, recent research shows no difference between White and Black Ohioans in the rate of deaths from Diseases of Despair.<sup>12</sup> African-American Ohioans are at more risk for overdose as





fentanyl is being laced with other drugs; at the same time, they lack access to important resources that can prevent overdose.<sup>13</sup> Preventing overdose among all Ohioans is an important goal, equally important is examining the social determinants that can impact the health and health behaviors of Ohioans.

Public Health itself has been under attack even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Ohio ranks 37<sup>th</sup> in Public Health funding by the United Health Foundation.<sup>14</sup> This can be seen in the high rates of smoking and cardiovascular diseases in the state.<sup>14</sup> Since the pandemic, we have been seeing attacks on the very concept of public health. Governmental bodies are seeking to limit collective efforts to improve the health of communities in favor of individualistic strategies where vaccines and mask-wearing are seen as a personal choice. In this way, the government and other organizations can then paint morbidity and mortality because of people's personal choices and not social and economic factors, just like smoking. Public Health policies and other collective forms of action to improve people's health are not popular among many policymakers, which led to the passing of legislation limiting public health activities.<sup>15</sup>

As *OJPH* editor, I see the *Ohio Journal of Public Health* as an important tool to highlight the health issues facing Ohioans and an important tool for advocates looking for evidence-based material. While there are many health issues in the state, there are also dedicated public health workers, academics, and other professionals across the state working to improve the health of communities. I look forward to helping authors share their work with others and aiding students in becoming academic writers.

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