

May 14, 2020

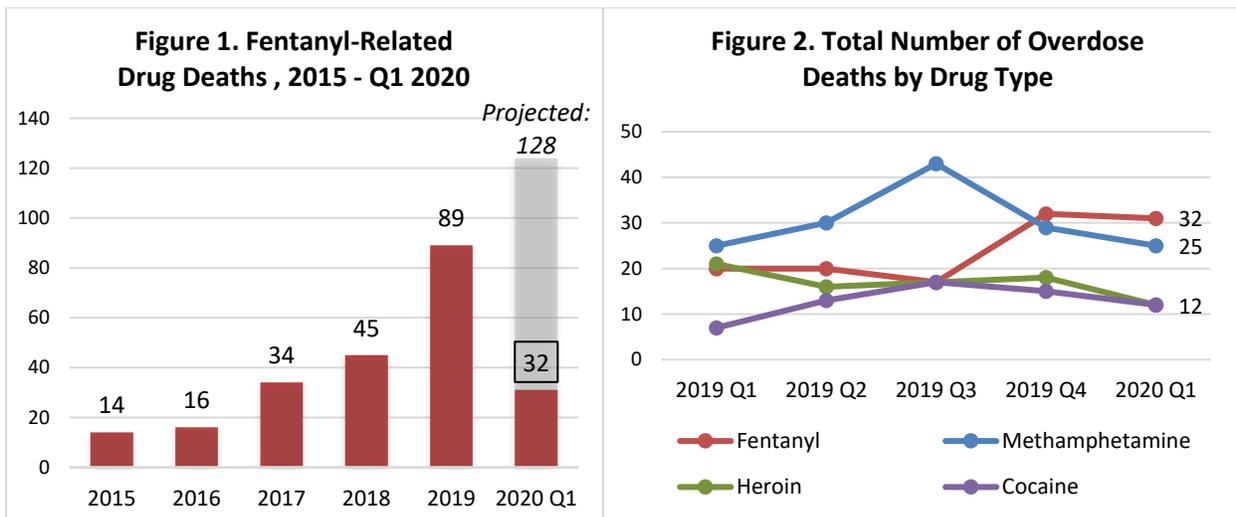
RE: Sustained Increase in Fentanyl-Related Overdose Deaths

Dear Community Providers,

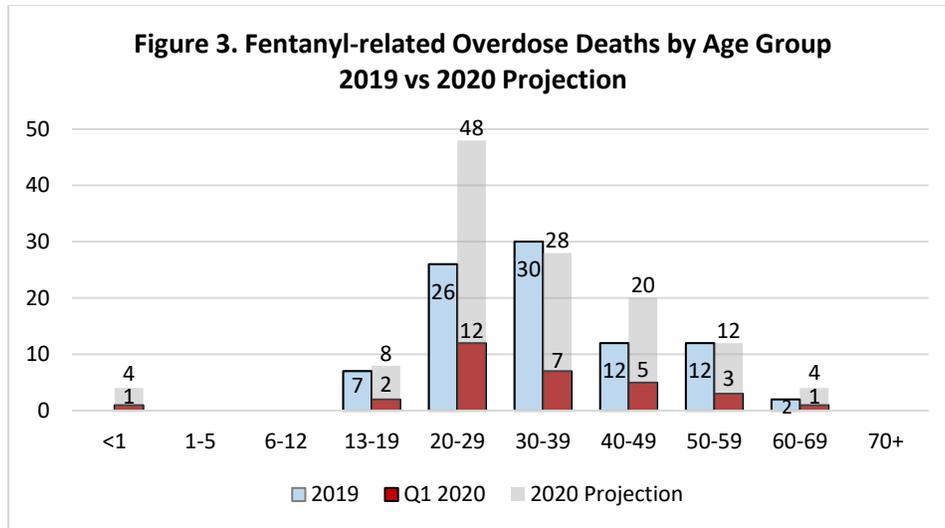
This notification serves as an update to the ongoing series of health alerts regarding sustained increases in fentanyl, methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine related overdose deaths in Pima County. The original alert was issued June 21, 2019 in response to an 82% increase in fentanyl overdoses observed over the first quarter of 2019. Since then, fentanyl-related deaths continue to be alarmingly high.

Situational Update

Surveillance data from January 1 to March 31, 2020 show a total of 32 fentanyl deaths (**figure 1**). If this trend continues, fentanyl deaths are projected to reach over 100 by the end of 2020. Additionally, for the first time fentanyl deaths have surpassed methamphetamine deaths as the largest single drug contribution to overdose deaths (**figure 2**). This trend can be seen in the last two quarters and is illustrated in the graph on the right.



Lastly, we have observed a greater number of persons ages 20-29 impacted by fentanyl (**figure 3**). In 2020, the number of fentanyl deaths in this age group (12) is nearly double the average number of fentanyl deaths per quarter in 2019 (6.5). If this trend continues, we estimate 48 fentanyl deaths in this age group by the end of the year, a potential 85% increase. Of note, three fentanyl-related deaths were aged 19 or younger, one of which was an infant. Overall, young adults, teens, and children made up 50% of the fentanyl deaths in the first quarter of the year (ages 27 and under).



Provider Recommendations

The Pima County Health Department is asking all local substance use providers to:

- Alert patients and families of the extreme risk of overdose or death associated with fentanyl.
- Encourage safe practices with particular emphasis on younger populations who may be experimenting, less experienced, or opioid naïve (low tolerance).
- Make sure clients, patients, and community members understand the high potency of fentanyl.
- Distribute Fentanyl test strips and Naloxone to high risk individuals and their family members.
- Promote harm reduction techniques to help decrease risks (e.g. never use alone, carry naloxone, and use miniscule amounts of a drug to test potency, etc.).

Risk Factors

The most prominent risk factors seen in fatal overdoses include the following characteristics:

- Individuals using drugs alone in isolation
- Drug use following a period of abstinence or depleted tolerance, particularly in close proximity to release from hospital, jail, prison, or treatment program.
- Consuming multiple drugs simultaneously or in close proximity to one another. This is particularly true when an opioid is mixed with another sedative like alcohol, benzodiazepines, or hypnotics. The combination of psychostimulants and sedatives (e.g. cocaine + heroin) also significantly increases the risk of overdose and death.

The Health Department will continue to conduct surveillance, closely monitor these trends, and will produce future alerts. We hope this information will support treatment strategies, healthy messaging to patient populations and families. If you have questions or want to learn how your agency can obtain free Naloxone, please contact our Community Mental Health and Addiction team at CMHA@Pima.Gov or call (520) 724-7797. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mark Person, MSP
Program Manager
Community Mental Health and Addiction