



Drug Overdose Health Alert for December 2021

January 26, 2022

Dear Community Providers,

The Health Department's Community Mental Health and Addiction (CMHA) team conducts routine surveillance of local overdose trends. Surveillance looks at specific data sets to monitor and record trends in critical public health indicators commonly associated with substance use. **This notification serves as an advisory as drug overdose deaths have surpassed the alert threshold for the month of December 2021.**

Methods

The CMHA team uses a six-month moving average to set thresholds for issuing health alerts. The alert indicator is set at 10% greater than the moving average. This alert indicator allows for standardized methodology for the team to issue alerts when local overdose trends reach higher than expected totals.

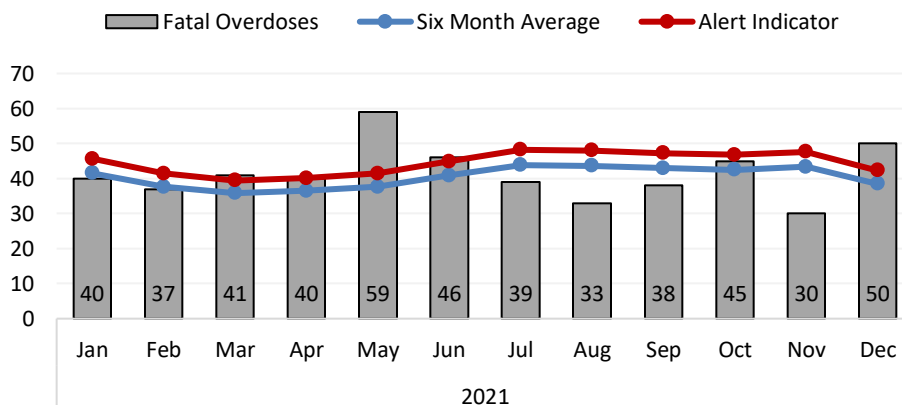
Mortality Data

Data from Arizona Department of Health Services' Vital Records and Pima County's Office of the Medical Examiner were used in this alert. There is an inherent data lag in the death certification process and the required time to complete the medical examination. Given these factors, this report is limited to information available at the time the report was completed.

Alert

A point in time count on 01/26/2022 confirmed 50 overdose deaths for December 2021, exceeding the alert threshold (*Figure 1*). Note, December counts are preliminary, as some cases may still be pending.

Figure 1. Count of Overdoses by Month with Six Month Moving Average



The same point in time count also confirmed 498 fatal overdoses in 2021 (Figure 2). Fentanyl remains the most common drug involved in fatal overdoses, contributing to 295 deaths or 59% of all overdoses (Figure 3). Methamphetamine contributed to 204 fatal overdoses in 2021, or 41%. Combined, 81% of all overdoses included fentanyl and/or methamphetamine.

Figure 2. Fatal Overdoses by Year

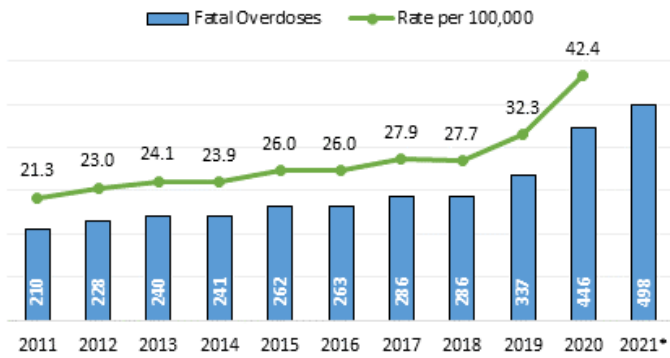
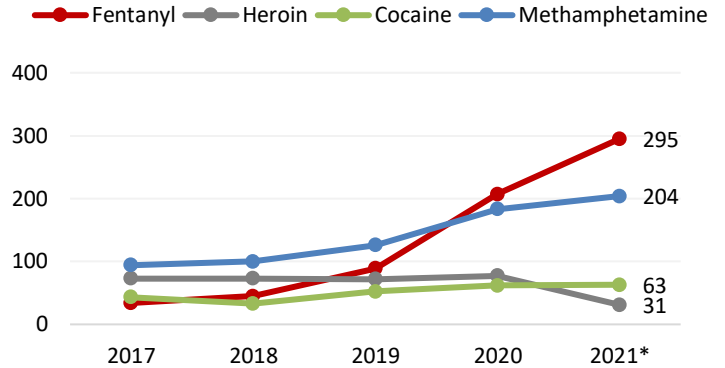
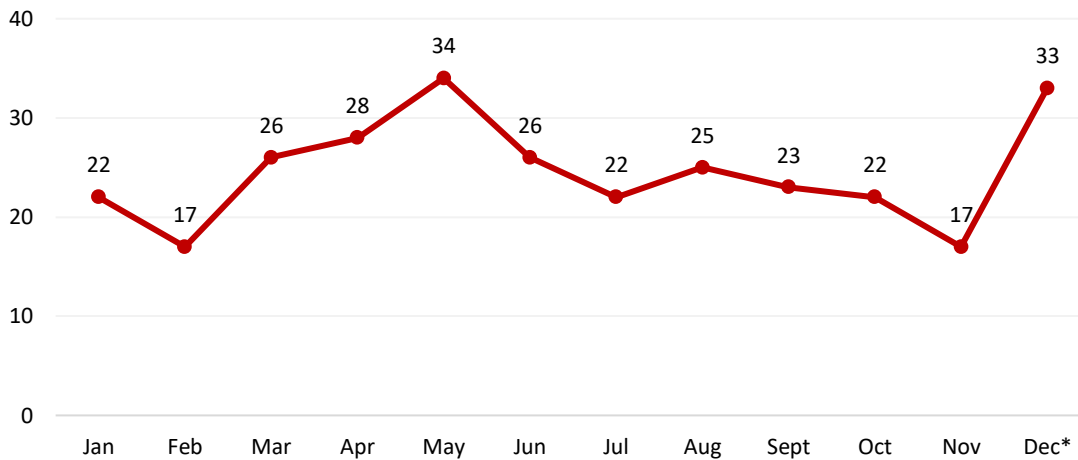


Figure 3. Top 4 Drugs Involved in Overdoses by Year



As shown in Figure 4, deaths involving fentanyl peaked in May 2021 (n = 34) before decreasing and remaining relatively consistent with a monthly average of 23 through November 2021. Even with the decrease after May 2021, **fentanyl continued to be the top contributor of overdose deaths**. In December 2021 alone, there were 33 deaths involving fentanyl, a 94% increase from November. The December count is also 43% higher than the monthly average for the 2021 calendar year.

Figure 4. Fentanyl Involved Overdoses by Month 2021



Provider Recommendations

- Alert patients and provide educational materials (signs, brochures, etc.) explaining the extreme risk of overdose/death associated with fentanyl due to its high potency (50-100x the strength of morphine) and unpredictable concentrations.
- Place additional emphasis on education aimed at younger populations who may be experimenting or have a low tolerance for opioids.
- Promote harm reduction to mitigate risks (e.g. never use alone, carry naloxone, tell a supportive person prior to using, never use multiple drugs simultaneously, and use fentanyl test strips).
- Distribute naloxone and fentanyl test strips as frequently as possible for patients and families.
- Encourage discarding a substance and/or harm reduction strategies whenever fentanyl is detected with a test strip.
- Advise patients to use small, incremental amounts to test the effects of a drug; never assume the remaining contents will produce the same effect.
- If you are an eligible provider, consider obtaining a [buprenorphine waiver](#) to help support local efforts to treat opioid use disorder.

Overdose Risk Factors

- Using drugs alone or in secret if others are present.
- Drug use following a period of abstinence, particularly after release from a hospital, jail, or other facility.
- Consuming sedatives with other sedatives (e.g., opioids with alcohol, benzodiazepines, or hypnotics).
- Consuming sedatives with psychostimulants (e.g., opioids with cocaine or amphetamines).
- Experimenting with drugs as someone with little tolerance and/or poor understanding of the risks.
- Inability to judge the strength of illicitly produced fentanyl due to unpredictable concentrations.

Our Commitment

- The Health Department will continue to conduct surveillance, closely monitor these trends, and share all findings and recommendations as they materialize.
- We have accelerated local naloxone distribution with the goal of community-wide coverage and accessibility. We anticipate a minimum 400% increase in quantity of naloxone kits distributed in 2021.
- With the recent legalization of fentanyl test strips and the approval to use federal grant dollars to purchase these kits, efforts are now underway to bring this resource to our community in the first half 2022, free of cost.
- Lastly, we are offering free presentations for youth and young adults about fentanyl. These can be arranged by you or your agency at any time, and we will provide everything required.

We hope this information will support treatment strategies and informative health messaging for patient populations. To learn more about how to obtain free naloxone, availability of fentanyl test strips, or to schedule a presentation, please contact us at CMHA@Pima.Gov or call (520) 724-7470.