

July 15, 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 and other illicit drug-related overdose deaths. The last alert was issued May 14, 2020 in response to a spike in fentanyl overdoses. Since then fentanyl deaths have maintained an upward trend. Surveillance data from January 1 to June 28, 2020 show a total of 78 fentanyl deaths (*figure 1*). When broken further the number of deaths is also increasing from one month to the next (*figure 2*), with May recording the highest total in a single month. The month of June is an incomplete data set and is expected to increase once pending investigations are complete.

Figure 1. Fentanyl-related Drug Deaths 2015 - June 28, 2020

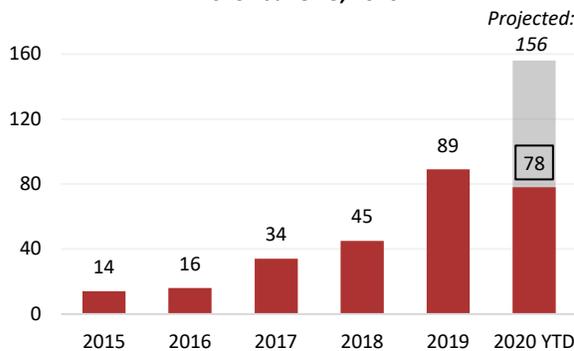
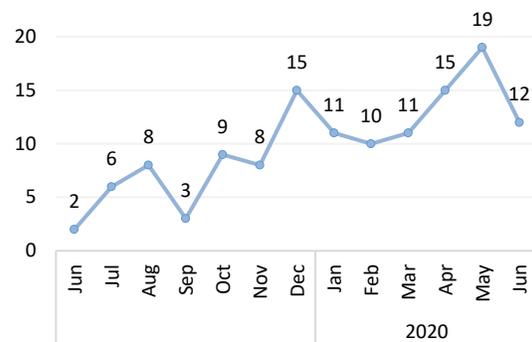


Figure 2. Fentanyl Deaths by Month June 2019 - June 2020



We continue to observe a greater number of persons aged 20-29 impacted by fentanyl (*figure 3*). In the first half of 2020, fentanyl-related drug deaths in this age group (33) have exceeded that of the previous year (26) and are projected to reach 66 deaths, a potential 154% increase. So far this year, fentanyl has been attributed to 79% of overdose deaths in this population and in the month of May, accounted for 100% of drug deaths in 20-29 year olds (*figure 4*).

Figure 3. Fentanyl-related Drug Deaths by Age Group 2019 vs Jan 1 - June 28, 2020

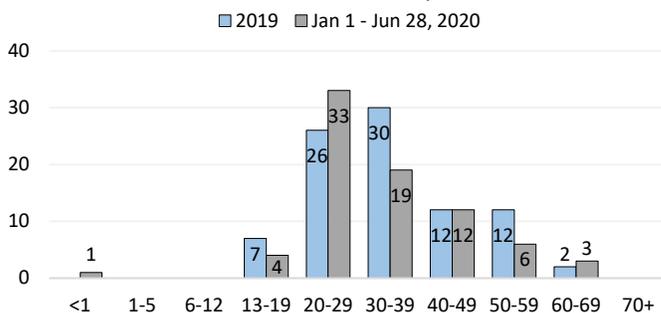
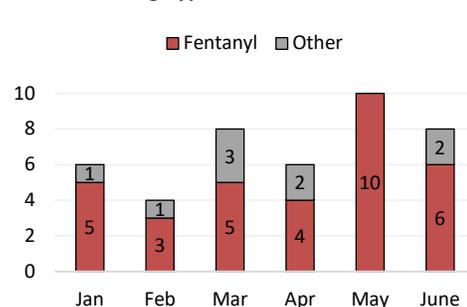


Figure 4. Drug Deaths in Ages 20-29 by Drug Type and Month, 2020



Provider Recommendations

- Alert patients and post signs explaining the extreme risk of overdose/death associated with fentanyl due to its high potency and unpredictable concentrations.
- Place additional emphasis on education aimed at younger populations who may be experimenting or opioid naïve (low tolerance).
- Distribute fentanyl test strips and Naloxone to high-risk individuals and their family.
- Promote harm reduction to mitigate risks (e.g. never use alone, carry naloxone, tell a supportive person nearby prior to using, and never use multiple drugs simultaneously).

Risk Factors

- Individuals who use drugs alone or in secret if others are present.
- 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. This is particularly true when an opioid is mixed with another sedative like alcohol, benzodiazepines, or hypnotics. The combination of psychostimulants and sedatives also significantly increases the risk of overdose.
- People experimenting with drugs with little tolerance and poor understanding of the risks.

Updated Messaging

Harm reduction techniques sometimes include using small test amounts of a drug, often referred to as “tester shots” to prevent an overdose. Historically, this provided some protection, but with the presence of non-pharmaceutical fentanyl, this may no longer be safe for the following reasons:

- Fentanyl is 50-100x the strength of morphine.
- Non-pharmaceutical fentanyl tablets contain unpredictable concentrations.
- When pressed into pill form the drug is not evenly distributed inside the tablet.
- A single tablet broken into smaller “test amounts” will not reduce the potency/strength. The end result is that the test itself may prove to be fatal.
- The test amount could provide false confidence that the remaining contents of the tablet are safe if the initial amount produces little to no effect.
- Lastly, fentanyl test strips may offer some protection, but only if the person is willing to discard the drug when fentanyl is detected.

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 want to learn how your agency can obtain free Naloxone or more information about fentanyl, 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