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# The Lethal Injection Epidemic:

## The impact the fentanyl epidemic on first responders and communities

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**Impact Report**

**Drug Enforcement Research Office**



(Uribe, 2023)

**28 October, 2024**

**Drug Enforcement Administration**

**Isabella Maglio**

## Letter of Transmittal:

Isabella Maglio  
1 Old Ferry Road  
Bristol, Rhode Island

Oscar L. Perez  
Chief of Police  
Providence Police Department  
25 Dorrance Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903.

Dear Chief Perez,

I am pleased to present to you the findings of my research regarding the impact fentanyl has presented on law enforcement and first responders. I have prepared this impact report in response to your request for research regarding the topic that continues to be a substantial obstacle within our department as well as community. I have provided my overall analysis of the findings regarding when the issue started, how it has become a dilemma, as well as my recommendations as a researcher and professional in the field.

My findings within this report highlights the level of this challenge within our department and proves that we are not alone within this. Departments across the United States, especially cities are struggling to find a resolution to this exact matter. I believe that a few departments have found a solution that we could model and through passing of government bills this issue can be conquered. I believe a few changes need to be made to make the department appropriately equipped to deal with the situation at hand. It will take some time to get there but it is worth the price in order to relieve the stress that is being placed upon first responders.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me: 401-555-5690.  
Sincerely,

*Isabella Maglio*

## **Abstract:**

The fentanyl crisis has been estimated to have taken a quarter million lives in America since its introduction and continues to bring forth an alarming death toll to Americans every year. (Uribe, 2023). It is no secret that this is an epidemic that must be addressed in order to save lives. The drug's inexpensive creation as well as its appeal for 'the ultimate high' has led to its substantial numbers. The number that continues to grow of grams sold along with the death toll. Fentanyl's quick rise to popularity created misinformation and fear, making it a challenge for police officers and first responders to respond in a timely fashion with overdose calls. Along with this, is the challenge of changing ways of policing within this epidemic to better suit public safety and putting an end to the rising death count. The police continue to face the challenge of how to respond within the epidemic regarding how they can help and make the difference America needs.

## **Introduction:**

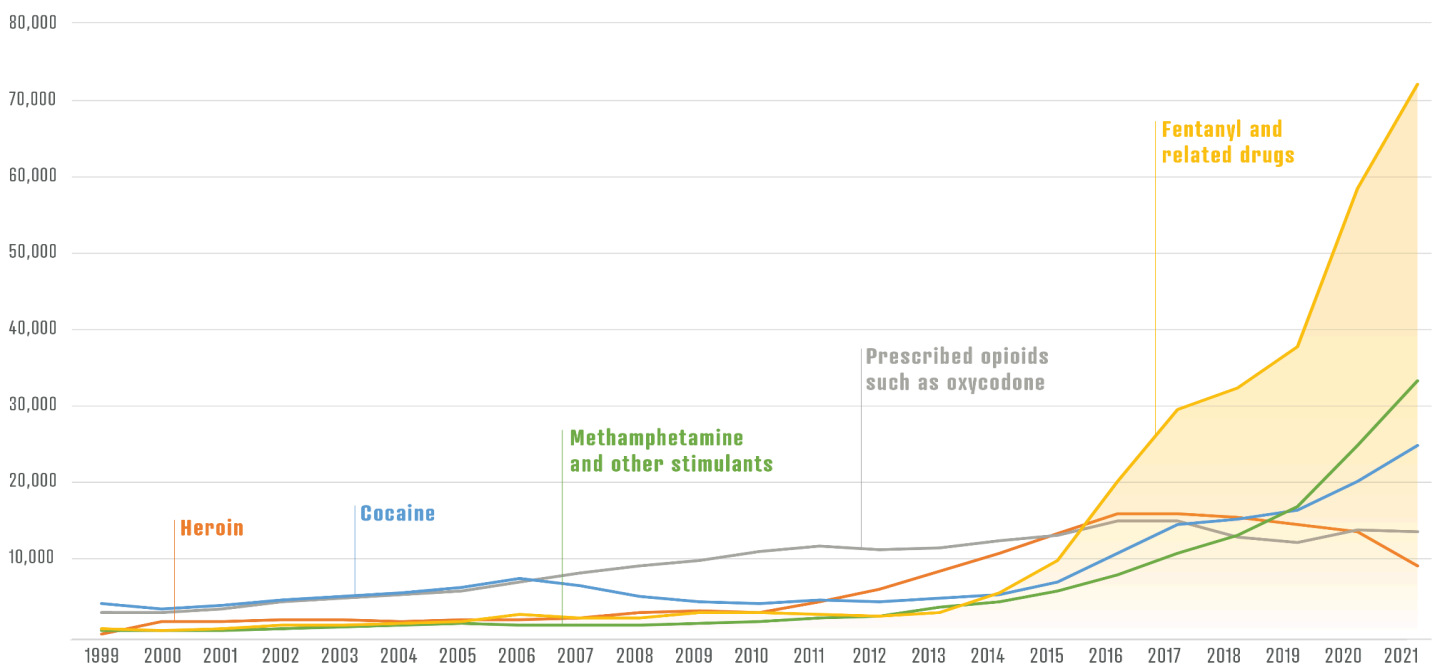
### [Overview](#)

Over the years, it has become increasingly apparent that the illicit drug market is not the same as it was. Overdoses have become the leading cause of death in the United States, and Naloxone is now increasingly high in demand. Surprisingly, this is not due to heroin; rather, stemming from a synthetic introduced into the market around 2011. We can attribute the rising death toll to the introduction of the drug with the street names of 'Flatline' 'Lethal Injection' and 'Drop Dead' (Jones, 2023), fentanyl. The fatality rate surpasses anything Americans have ever seen during other drug crises. Fentanyl has killed more Americans than in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam wars combined, reaching a death toll of 74,000. (Katz, 2023). The increased usage of this fatal drug continues to place significant threats and complications to law enforcement and overall public safety.

### History And Causes

Contrary to belief, fentanyl is not new to the drug market. Fentanyl was created for use in the medical field in the 1960's as an anesthetic and is still prescribed by doctors today. It is produced inexpensively and is easily manufactured, making it appealing for illicit drug labs to sell. A significant factor of its appeal is the potency, a small amount is needed for the drug to produce the “ultimate high”. Fentanyl is from fifty to one hundred times more potent than many prescription opioids. (Macmillan, 2024), creating a high risk of overdose. The drug's potency, as well as the way it is manufactured, presents the core issue within this epidemic. Due to the fact that this drug can be produced inexpensively, many dealers add fentanyl to other substances to ‘stretch’ their drug supply. Creating the obstacle in which drug users are unknowingly consuming an unspecified dosage of this incredibly powerful synthetic. Even a minor mathematical error of measuring the grams either from the dealer or the user, can result in a high risk of overdose. Both scenarios which have contributed to the substantial number of deaths and overdoses.

(Hayes, 2021).



## Analysis:

### *The Impact of Misinformation within the Epidemic:*

Driven by fear, the misconception that one can get a 'second hand high' from touching or breathing near someone that has overdosed has plagued first responders. This thought process has presented detrimental impacts within response time as well as impacting grieving families within this epidemic. Misinformation from once trusted sources of information have made officers hesitant to respond to overdose calls. The *Drug Enforcement Administration* as well as the *Center for Disease Control and Prevention* both released that Fentanyl exposure through inhalation or absorption can cause an overdose and advised police to use protective gear when handling calls that involve drugs. "This has never happened," said Dr. Ryan Marino, a toxicologist and emergency room physician who studies addiction at Case Western Reserve University. "There has never been an overdose through skin contact or accidentally inhaling fentanyl." (Mann, 2023). These inaccuracies were only echoed by other trusted sources within the field such as *The Department of Justice* and the *National Police Foundation*. The misinformation continues to be believed by many and has made the epidemic even harder to combat.

### *Misinformation Impacting First Responders:*

Due to this misinformation and the fear that continues to impact first responders, there has been a lot of panic and anxiety when it comes to overdose calls. Leading to panic attacks that appear to be overdoses from first responders. August 2021 a San Diego Police Sheriff named Bill

Gore released body cam footage of a fellow officer having an “overdose” due to exposure to fentanyl in the middle of a drug investigation. Four doses of naloxone were administered first two within seconds of the officers collapse due to the drugs and two a few minutes later. Later it was revealed that the officer's symptoms aligned with a panic attack rather than the opposed overdose. Proving that the real risk within this epidemic to first policing is not having a contact overdose rather, it is the stress, fear, and anxiety that comes within responding to such calls with misinformation from credible sources clouding the brain. “Imagine you do a job every day where you just think being near a certain car or a certain person [who might have fentanyl] could kill you,’ Del Pozo said” (Mann, 2023). These challenges have presented considerable stress and obstacles to law enforcement and presented other unique difficulties to the job due to the fear of this truly fatal drug.

### *The Misinformation Fentanyl in Policing:*

The substantial number of overdoses and deaths has led to significant stress on law enforcement and first responders. Due to the increased use of the lethal drug, officers are facing an overwhelming volume of calls regarding overdoses. The New York Time Magazine highlights an incident that happened in Erie County, New York where a total of 7 overdose calls in the span of just five hours came into the police station. “The spate of deaths, on June 17, pushed the county’s tally of overdose deaths this year past 200, putting it on track to match or surpass the grim record of 435 set last year even as the United States saw a slight decline in such deaths.” (McKinley, 2024). Despite Fentanyl being an issue since its introduction to the drug market, it continues to be a battle for policing. Police have not seen an overdose crisis this substantial. The heroin crisis was far reaching and impacted policing, but not on the colossal

scale that this epidemic continues to prove to be. “The crisis knows no bounds. This is from the wealthiest areas in Erie County, and the poorest sections of the inner city. This is black and white, male and female. It does not discriminate.” said John Garcia, the county’s sheriff.” (McKinley, 2024). The issue surrounding the idea that law enforcement has become increasingly aware of the methods of arresting the way out of the pandemic is simply not effective. With this has come the call to adopt a new method of policing that officers were ill equipped for. “Elected officials say that Erie County’s struggle comes despite a yearslong effort to combat the problem, including an overdose prevention task force and access to anti-overdose drugs and addiction counseling.” (McKinley, 2024). With this problem being rather new and unlike what has been seen before, there is a considerable amount of adaptations that need to be made as well as misinformation that needs to be addressed.

### *New Plans of Policing:*

Law enforcement has had to adapt to the issues presented by the fentanyl epidemic through implementing new ways in which to appropriately respond to calls. It is apparent, that arresting out of the epidemic is not effective and impacts public safety. Instead, it is safer for everyone involved to engage in harm reduction strategies, a term that is new to the vocabulary of the public. Harm Reduction is the philosophy that in order to end this crisis we need to take preventative measures while also changing laws and policies to allow for a greater range of help. “Strategies include increasing access to naloxone, removing barriers to implementation of harm reduction strategies, such as drug checking and test strips, and supporting increased access to treatment and recovery services.” (Jones, 2023). The focus of these laws and policies are four key areas: primary prevention, harm reduction, evidence-based treatment, and recovery support.

These four areas will aid in preventing overdoses while also rendering help in the event that it does.

Over the years law enforcement had to face ‘added’ on roles in which society expects them to bring when they are called to the scene. With this multitude of expectations especially within the epidemic, law enforcement have been expected to aid in every way possible. With this epidemic being a drug problem many feel as if naturally police and other first responders have “front row seats” and therefore it is their responsibility to help. Police are expected to help not only enforce the law but to do medical work, crisis prevention/intervention, social work, etc. This is especially true now due to the unique problems the epidemic poses on both first responders as well as public safety. “Although policy makers of all political and disciplinary stripes debate funding and strategies, police do not have the luxury to throw up their hands and opt out of ‘doing something’. What is clear is that the answers ‘it’s not our responsibility’ and ‘We don’t know what to do’ are not acceptable to most police executives.” (Varano, Sean., Kelley Pamela., & Maklouta, Nicholas 2019). Due to the unique circumstances surrounding responding to the epidemic from the new research police stations have begun to problem shoot how to respond appropriately and effectively.

#### *Champion Plan:*

New plans of actions and guidelines of how to respond to overdose or drug calls have been implemented by police departments using techniques and ways they consider to be more effective in aiding help to those that seek it. One of which being “The Champion Plan” first deployed in Brockton Massachusetts. Rooted in harm reduction philosophy this plan was that if anyone came into the Brockton Police Department and asked for help regarding substance abuse



no questions would be asked from the police. Instead of throwing these people behind bars which had proven to be ineffective the police department would take their drugs, safely dispose of it, and then admit the person themselves in a detox or rehab program. Data proves that this plan was more effective than arresting the individual that was in a medical crisis and throwing them behind bars to detox and then be re-released to reoffend. "Data show 523 individuals walked into the Brockton Police Department 818 times looking for help during the first 24 months of operation. Program staff were able to secure placement beds, on average, within 90 minutes of making contact with clients. Program clients report high levels of satisfaction with the program model, and early data indicate that a substantial number of clients retain engagement with services beyond intake." (Varano, Sean., Kelley Pamela., & Maklouta, Nicholas 2019). This just further showcases the need to take a different approach to this crisis than the normal procedures that police officers are used to within just enforcing the law.

### *Suggestions:*

Through the research that I composed regarding this topic it is clear the steps that need to be taken to effectively stop this widespread death that has seemed to sweep the nation. Firstly, implementing harm reduction plans and strategies within police departments to save as many lives as possible. Even if a few people were to take advantage of it, that is evidently better than getting a call of a deceased person due to fentanyl. Next is continuing to educate officers regarding misinformation and what is correct regarding fentanyl exposure. It is incredibly rare to overdose when exposed to the drug. "fentanyl toxicity from incidental exposure was so unlikely as to be nearly impossible" (Moss, 2018). Continuing this belief falsely turns a medical

emergency into a perceived life or death scenario making it harder for these people to get the help that they need in a timely manner due to the fear.

Through these experiences and learning proper harm reduction techniques, it is critical that law enforcement shares their experiences to further pressure aid through politicians. The Biden-Harris Administration made great strides in order to stop the epidemic which needs to be continued to expand access to Naloxone and these life saving strategies, “These measures include new guidelines for the inclusion of overdose reversal medications in safety stations in all federal facilities, and calls to action for schools and housing authorities to ensure that overdose reversal medications are available to those who are vulnerable to overdose. The White House requested \$1.55 billion to expand treatment for addiction and harm reduction programs under State Opioid Response grants.” (Jones, 2022). These new guidelines will and have saved lives. Through implementing strategies that not only help reduce the fatality by providing expanded access to a life saving drug but also by offering increased access to programs that will help these people get better. Proven through research it is simply not effective nor possible to stop this pandemic through arresting individuals that ask for help, you must respond with compassion and help that individual get the help they need and deserve. With this, the suggestions that feel the most appropriate to fight this epidemic is to strengthen these programs especially within police stations and keep advocating and supporting harm reduction strategies and education.

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