

# HCS Media Backgrounder: Fentanyl Mixed with Stimulants

## BACKGROUND: FENTANYL MIXED WITH STIMULANTS – FACTS AND STRATEGIES TO REDUCE OVERDOSES

It is well known that the powerful opioid fentanyl and related opioid synthetics have contributed to the rise in opioid overdose deaths in the United States. Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin. It is often mixed with heroin and other drugs as a cheap additive—escalating potency and leading to overdoses. Many people are unaware they are taking drugs containing fentanyl.

It is not as well known that fentanyl and related synthetic opioids are often added to other drugs including pills that look like prescription opioids, as well as cocaine and methamphetamine. Overdose deaths involving prescription opioids and heroin have been the focus of public health efforts since the mid-2000s, with overdose deaths from cocaine and methamphetamine rising steeply since 2009 attributed to fentanyl additives, with a 6-fold increase from 2015 to 2020.

### FENTANYL + STIMULANT-RELATED DEATHS

The surge in overdose deaths related to mixtures of fentanyl and stimulants in the past decade can be seen in this chart:



This image shows the equivalent lethal amounts of the synthetic opioids fentanyl (center) and carfentanyl (right) compared to the heroin vial on the left. [Courtesy DEA.](#)

### TRACKING FENTANYL-RELATED DEATHS

[Research](#) suggests a clear rise in use of both stimulants and fentanyl in the era of COVID-19. An [analysis](#) of a half million urine drug tests from various clinical settings was done in the first few months following the declared national public emergency in March 2020. Findings revealed a 23% increase in samples testing positive for methamphetamine; a 19% increase for cocaine; and a 67% increase for fentanyl.

OVERDOSE DEATHS	2009	2020
Psychostimulants (mostly methamphetamine) <b>mixed with</b> fentanyl-related drugs	176	11,717
Cocaine <b>mixed with</b> fentanyl-related drugs	69	13,903

CDC WONDER Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. [Accessed from NIDA website.](#)

It can be difficult for public health officials to know the exact number of deaths caused by fentanyl added to cocaine and methamphetamine. Death certificates do not always list all drugs involved in each overdose death, and when they do, they may not accurately list which drugs principally contributed to mortality.

A 2019 [study](#) using New York City death certificate data linked to medical examiner toxicology information suggested that fentanyl accounted for most of the increase in cocaine-involved deaths. Therefore, it is increasingly important to inform the public that people who use illicit stimulants—like cocaine and methamphetamine—may be at an increased risk for overdose deaths due to fentanyl.

### **EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH NEEDED ON STIMULANT USE, NALOXONE, AND RELATED ISSUES**

Multiple doses of naloxone may be needed to reverse an overdose due to fentanyl. Because fentanyl is increasingly present in cocaine and methamphetamine, it is advisable to make multiple doses of naloxone available to people using these drugs.

## RESOURCES

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**Media contact for questions about materials from the National Institute on Drug Abuse:**  
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/contact-press-office>