Center on Rural Addiction
UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

Increased Fatal Overdoses Involving Stimulants and Fentanyl

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Research Spotlight

The Problem: *Overdoses Involving Both Stimulants and Fentanyl Are Rising*

Over the past decade, drug overdose deaths involving psychostimulants have dramatically increased in rural U.S. counties[1] and opioids are involved in a growing proportion of stimulant (e.g., cocaine and methamphetamine) overdoses[2]. Although the increase in overdoses involving both opioids and stimulants may be attributed to opioids adulterated with stimulants, as well as intentional stimulant use among people who use opioids, recent reports suggest that fentanyl is increasingly present as a contaminant in illicit stimulants.[2, 3]

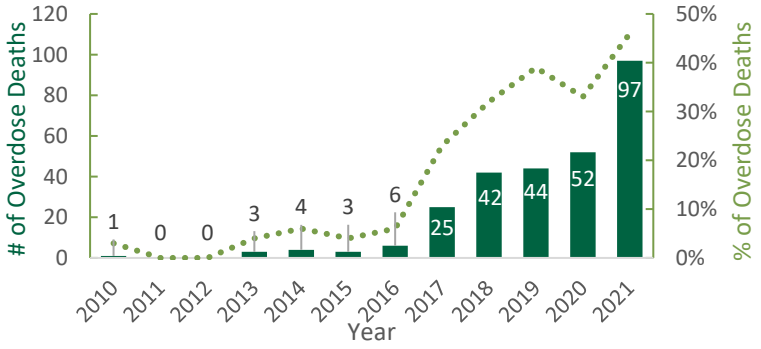

Figure 1. Number and percent of Vermont fatal overdoses involving the combination of cocaine and fentanyl, 2010-2021.[5]

A 2022 examination of National Poison Control data found a 374% increase in the proportion of fentanyl poisoning reports involving cocaine (1.5% in 2015; 7.3% in 2021), as well as a 669% increase in the proportion of fentanyl poisonings involving methamphetamine (1.1% in 2015; 8.7% in 2021).[4] These are consistent with a 2020 examination of national overdose rates, which showed significant recent increases in stimulant overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids (e.g., fentanyl) in non-metropolitan areas.[2] Vermont has seen a drastic increase in the number of deaths involving both cocaine and fentanyl (Figure 1), with 46% of all fatal opioid-related overdoses involving this combination in 2021.[5] These data suggest that the contamination of illicit stimulants with fentanyl may be becoming more common and highlights the importance of harm reduction, especially in rural communities with limited emergency care access.

Interventions: *Harm Reduction and Education*

Fentanyl Test Strips. Traditionally promoted among people who use opioids, fentanyl test strips can detect the presence of fentanyl and many fentanyl analogs in a range of substances, including cocaine and methamphetamine, and are essential tools for reducing the risk of overdose. Knowing whether fentanyl is present allows people who use drugs to make informed choices about their use. Providing broad access to fentanyl test strips and promoting their correct and consistent use among people who use stimulants is increasingly important as contamination of illicit stimulants with fentanyl and associated overdoses increase.

Naloxone. Also traditionally promoted among people who use opioids, naloxone (intranasal or injectable) can be administered to reverse an opioid overdose and is an essential tool for people who use illicit stimulants as well as their friends and family members because of the risk of fentanyl-adulterated stimulants. Access to naloxone is critical in rural areas where distance, transportation, and other barriers might delay or limit access to medical care following an overdose.

Education is needed to ensure that people who use stimulants, first responders, and the larger community are aware of the risk of fentanyl-adulterated stimulants and the importance of harm reduction resources for overdose prevention and response.

For more information or to access these and other resources, please contact cora@uvm.edu.

[1] Hedegaard H, Spencer MR. Urban–rural differences in drug overdose death rates, 1999–2019. NCHS Data Brief, no 403. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2021. DOI: https://dx.doi. org/10.15620/cdc:102891.

[2] Hoots *et al.* (2020). The rise in non-fatal and fatal overdoses involving stimulants with and without opioids in the United States. Addiction. 115(5): 946-958.

[3] Park *et al.* (2020). Fentanyl and fentanyl analogs in the illicit stimulant supply: Results from U.S. drug seizure data, 2011–2016. Drug and Alcohol Dependence. 218(1): 108416.

[4] Palamar *et al.* (2022). Trends in characteristics of fentanyl related poisonings in the United States. American Journal of Drug Alcohol Abuse. 15: 1-10.

[5] Vermont Department of Health (2022). Opioid-Related Fatal Overdoses Among Vermonters. Retrieved from: https://www.healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs/reports/data-and-reports.

This publication is supported by the Heath Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling $17,032,587 with zero percentage financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.