



The Case for Illicit Fentanyl and
Synthetic Drug Poisoning Education
in Florida

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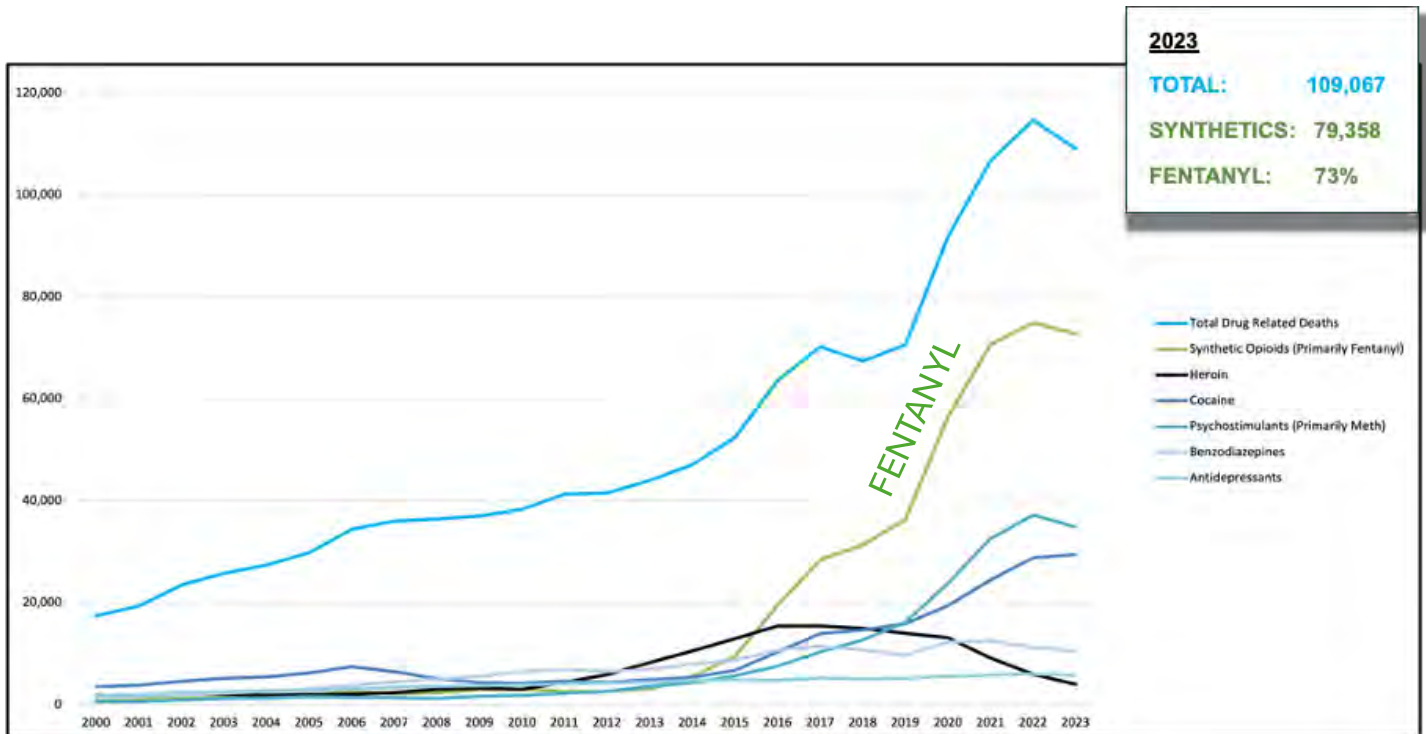
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The Rise of Fentanyl and the Threat to American Youth

Illicit fentanyl has rapidly become one of the greatest threats to American youth, fueling a devastating surge in poisoning deaths. This powerful synthetic opioid is often mixed into counterfeit pills, powders, and even vape products, making it nearly impossible to detect. Just a few grains can be lethal, and its widespread availability through social media and illegal markets has made experimentation increasingly deadly.

Fentanyl poisoning is now the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 45, with teenagers and children under 14 being the fastest-growing demographic affected. In the past seven years, over 6,700 adolescents aged 10-19 have died from fentanyl poisoning, along with over 65,000 young adults in their 20s. Most victims unknowingly consume fentanyl-laced substances, unaware that the pill, powder, or vape they are using contains this lethal drug. Poisoning deaths involving synthetic opioids, primarily fentanyl, have skyrocketed from approximately 19,413 in 2016 to a peak of 74,921 in 2022. While provisional data suggests a slight decline in 2023 and 2024, fentanyl remains the leading cause of poisoning fatalities, and the crisis is far from over.

The recent decrease in deaths offers a glimmer of hope, but the widespread availability and potency of illicit fentanyl continue to pose an urgent danger. Raising awareness and educating young people about its risks is critical to preventing further tragedies. Understanding the dangers, recognizing the signs, and spreading the message can help save lives before it's too late.



CDC WONDER, National Center on Health Statistics, Underlying Causes of Death, ICD-10 Codes, Drug Poisonings, Subsets of T40.0-T40.6, T42.4, T43.0 – T43.2, T43.6

Florida - #2 Across the Board Nationwide

Aggregate data from the CDC, covering 2018-2024, shows the United States has lost over 3 million people to drug-related deaths. Florida holds a consistent rank of #2 in number of overall drug-related, any opioid, and fentanyl deaths.

Total US Deaths – All Ages 2018 through 2024 Total Drug-Related – Any Opioid - Fentanyl

Rank	Residence State	Total Drug-Related Deaths	Residence State	Any Opioid Related Death	Residence State	Fentanyl Death
1	Texas	210,421	California	38,309	California	30,066
2	Florida	191,727	Florida	31,962	Florida	27,120
3	Ohio	165,028	New York	28,647	New York	25,138
4	New York	151,298	Ohio	25,779	Ohio	23,695
5	Michigan	136,415	Pennsylvania	23,271	Pennsylvania	21,086
TOTAL US		3,065,469		453,541		379,827

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Provisional Mortality on CDC WONDER Online Database. Data are from the final Multiple Cause of Death Files, 2018-2023, and from provisional data for years 2024 and later, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10-provisional.html> on Feb 23, 2025

Nationwide Reporting Disparities: There is a significant disparity in how illicit fentanyl deaths are reported across the United States. For this reason, CDC data about fentanyl death is considered by the advocate community as underreported. Several factors contribute to this inconsistency:

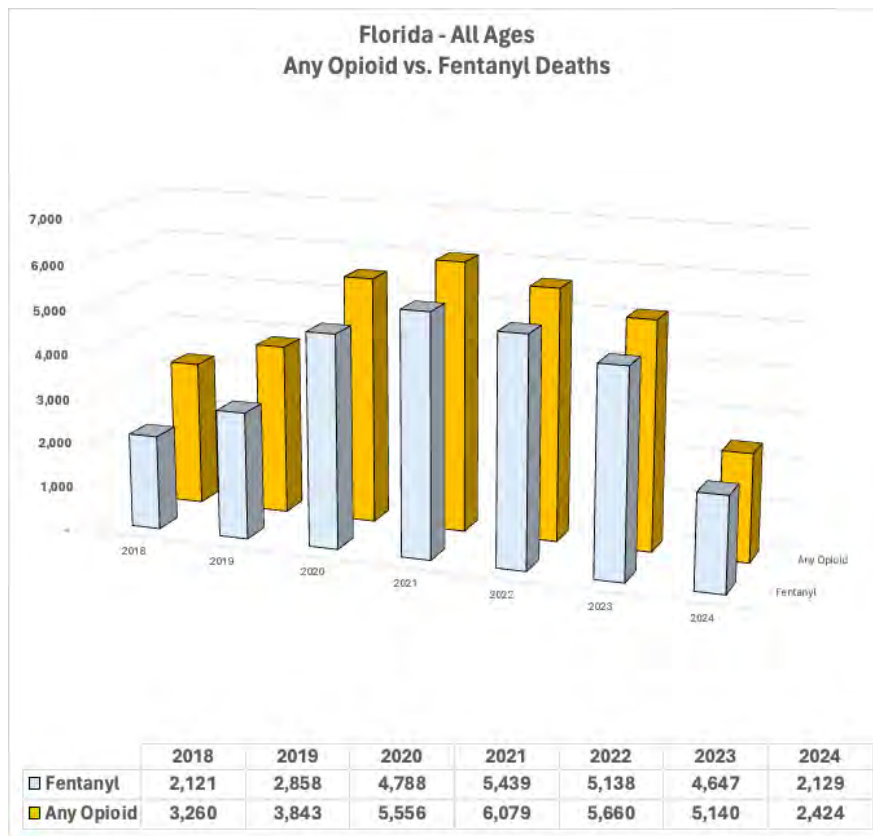
- **Varying Terminology and Classification** – Different medical examiners and coroners use different terminology when listing causes of death. Some may specify "fentanyl poisoning" or "fentanyl toxicity," while others may use broader terms like "opioid overdose" or "multi-drug toxicity," which can obscure fentanyl's role.
- **Testing Availability and Protocols** – Not all jurisdictions have the same access to toxicology testing. Some may test for fentanyl and its analogs as a standard practice, while others may not, leading to underreporting of fentanyl-related deaths.
- **Medical Examiner vs. Coroner Systems** – Some states have centralized, state-run medical examiner systems with forensic pathologists, while others rely on county-level coroner systems, where officials may not have medical training. This difference affects the quality and consistency of death investigations.
- **Political and Legal Considerations** – Some jurisdictions may underreport fentanyl-related deaths due to concerns about public perception, policy implications, or law enforcement priorities. Others may be more transparent in their reporting.
- **Manner of Death Classification** – Some medical examiners classify fentanyl deaths as "accidental overdoses," while others may determine them as "homicides" in cases of illicit fentanyl distribution. This can impact legal proceedings and public health data.
- **Data Reporting and Transparency** – The way states report data to agencies like the CDC can vary. Some states provide detailed breakdowns of fentanyl-related deaths, while others lump them into broader opioid categories, making it difficult to assess the true impact of illicit fentanyl.

Florida - Fentanyl Drives Opioid Deaths

Providing a closer look at opioid and fentanyl deaths in Florida, this graph displays these deaths in Florida across all ages from 2018 to 2024. The data shows a concerning increase in deaths from both fentanyl and other opioids, peaking in 2021 before gradually declining in the subsequent years. Total deaths during this time for any opioid were 31,962 and from fentanyl 27,120. Death from fentanyl makes up 85% of the opioid-related deaths in Florida.

2018 to 2021 Increase: Fentanyl-related deaths increased from 2,121 in 2018 to 5,439 in 2021, more than doubling within three years. Similarly, deaths involving any opioid increased from 3,260 in 2018 to 6,079 in 2021. The rise coincides with the broader national opioid crisis and the increasing prevalence of illicit fentanyl in drug supplies.

2022 to 2024 Decline: After reaching a peak in 2021, the numbers began to drop slightly in 2022, with fentanyl deaths decreasing to 5,138 and opioid deaths to 5,660. The downward trend continued in 2023 and 2024, with fentanyl-related deaths falling to 4,647 in 2023, and likewise, deaths from any opioid fell to 5,140 in 2023. This decline suggests the impact of increased awareness, policy changes, and harm reduction efforts, such as naloxone distribution and stricter drug regulations.



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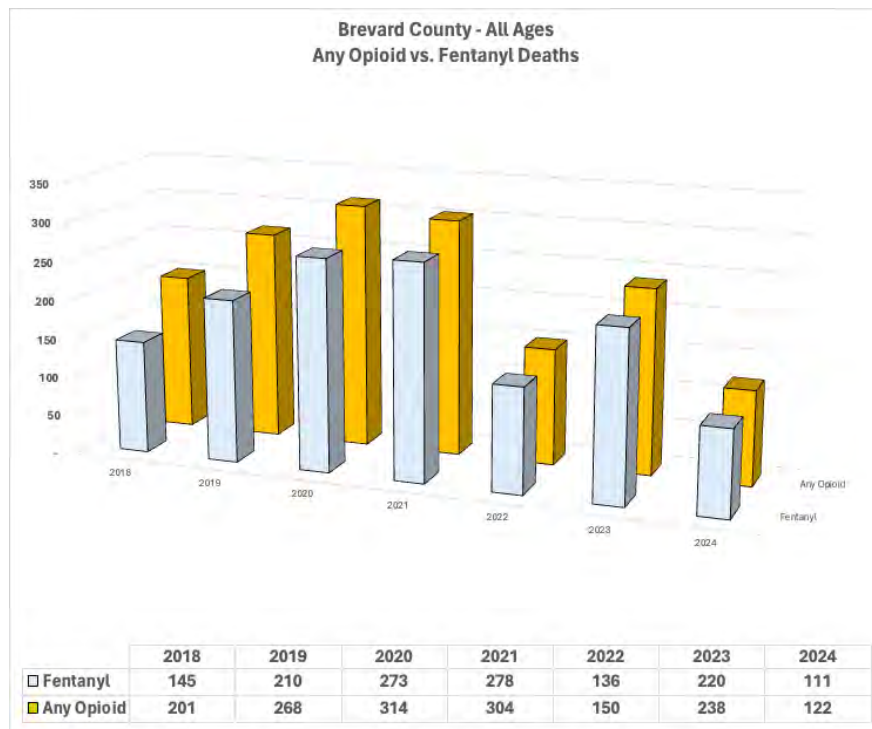
Key Observation: Overall, the data underscores the severity of Florida's fentanyl and opioid crisis, showing a peak in 2021 and a hopeful but cautious decline in recent years. However, ongoing intervention efforts will be crucial in ensuring sustained reductions in opioid-related fatalities.

Brevard County - Fentanyl Drives Opioid Deaths

The data for Brevard County shows a similar trend to that observed at the state level, with deaths peaking around 2020-2021 before experiencing a decline in the following years. Out of 1,597 opioid-related deaths in Brevard County, 1,373 (86%) were due to illicit fentanyl or other synthetic opioids.

2018 to 2021 Increase: Between 2018 and 2021, both fentanyl-related and overall opioid-related deaths rose significantly. Fentanyl deaths increased from 145 in 2018 to 278 in 2021, marking nearly a twofold rise. Similarly, deaths from any opioid increased from 201 in 2018 to 314 in 2020, slightly declining to 304 in 2021. The increase during this period aligns with the growing prevalence of fentanyl in the illicit drug supply, making it a leading cause of poisoning fatalities.

2022 to 2024 Decline: After reaching peak levels in 2020-2021, opioid-related deaths saw a sharp decline in 2022, with fentanyl-related deaths dropping to 136 and overall opioid deaths falling to 150. Although there was a slight increase in 2023, the numbers again dropped significantly in 2024, reaching 111 fentanyl-related deaths and 122 opioid-related deaths. This suggests that intervention measures, such as increased public awareness, access to naloxone, and policy changes, may have contributed to the decrease.



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Key Observation: Overall, the data reflects the broader fentanyl crisis in Florida but offers hope in the form of recent declines. Continued efforts in harm reduction, treatment availability, and law enforcement intervention will be critical in maintaining and improving this downward trend in Brevard County.

Brevard County Topping the Ranks

Since 2018, Brevard County has experienced 8,672 overall drug-related deaths. Of significant note, Brevard County has remained in the top 10 of 67 counties in the State of Florida for overall number of drug-related deaths, and except for 2022, it was in the top 10 in the state for the number of deaths from any opioid and fentanyl. More significantly, Brevard County has ranked in the top 5 in the state per crude rate, 100,000 persons per capita, for any opioid death and fentanyl death.

Brevard County 2018 through 2024 Total Drug-Related – Any Opioid - Fentanyl

Top 10 in State 

Year	Total Drug Related Deaths	Population	Crude Rate	Total Drug Related Death Rank	Crude Rate per 100K per Capita
2018	1,305	596,849	218.6	4	18
2019	1,303	601,942	216.5	5	17
2020	1,322	608,459	217.3	7	18
2021	1,327	616,628	215.2	8	22
2022	1,108	630,693	175.7	9	30
2023	1,139	643,979	176.9	9	26
2024	1,168	643,979	181.4	3	19
Total	8,672	4,342,529	199.7		

Top 5 in State 

Year	Total Any Opioid Deaths	Population	Crude Rate per 100K per Capita	Any Opioid Related Death Rank	Crude Rate Rank per 100K per Capita
2018	201	596,849	33.7	7	1
2019	268	601,942	44.5	3	1
2020	314	608,459	51.6	6	2
2021	304	616,628	49.3	6	4
2022	150	630,693	23.8	13	25
2023	238	643,979	37.0	8	5
2024	122	643,979	18.9	7	5
Total	1,597	4,342,529	36.8		
% of Opioid to Total Deaths	18.4%				

Year	Total Fentanyl Deaths	Population	Crude Rate per 100K per Capita	Fentanyl Related Death Rank	Crude Rate Rank per 100K per Capita
2018	145	596,849	24.3	6	1
2019	210	601,942	34.9	4	1
2020	273	608,459	44.9	7	2
2021	278	616,628	45.1	6	3
2022	136	630,693	21.6	11	24
2023	220	643,979	34.2	8	5
2024	111	643,979	17.2	7	3
Total	1,373	4,342,529	31.6		
% of Fent to Total Deaths	15.8%				

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Key Observation: Except for 2022, Brevard County has been in the top 10 counties in the state for all categories. It has been in the top 5 counties in the state for crude rate per capita for any opioid and fentanyl-related death.

Fentanyl Fueling Death of American Teens

Over the past seven years, illicit fentanyl and other synthetic opioids have significantly impacted mortality rates among American teenagers aged 10 to 19. The United States has lost 10,491 adolescents to drug-related deaths. Of those, 6,728 (64%) are attributed to illicit fentanyl.

Rise in Fentanyl-Related Deaths: The synthetic drug fentanyl has been a major driver of increased adolescent drug fatalities since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic, overdose deaths involving fentanyl among adolescents rose by 254%, from 471 deaths in 2019 to 1,199 in 2020.

Elevated Poisoning Death Rates: Rates of unintentional drug poisoning deaths among teens remained elevated through 2022, underscoring the persistent nature of this crisis.

Florida Teens: The state of Florida has seen 477 overall drug-related deaths in the age group 10-19. Of those deaths, 283, or 58%, were explicitly attributed to illicit fentanyl. Florida ranks #4 in the nation for overall drug and fentanyl-related teen deaths. Statewide, fentanyl accounts for 91% of drug poisoning deaths among adolescents.

United States Total Drug-Related Deaths, Ages 10-19

State/Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
California	97	131	325	287	223	216	91	1,370
Texas	58	62	135	173	190	207	134	959
Arizona	64	78	123	96	66	54	26	507
Florida	38	44	81	89	87	77	61	477
Colorado	23	42	71	71	77	56	23	363
Total US	921	1,037	1,802	1,982	1,934	1,861	954	10,491

Total Fentanyl Deaths, Ages 10-19

State/Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
California	36	84	264	239	171	165	62	1,021
Texas	-	12	73	104	139	159	84	571
Arizona	41	55	107	79	54	41	13	390
Florida	12	24	47	60	55	51	34	283
Colorado	-	-	45	49	52	31	-	177
Total US	367	471	1,199	1,431	1,400	1,337	523	6,728

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Key Observation: Overall, the data reflects the broader teen fentanyl crisis in Florida but offers hope in the form of recent declines. Substantial efforts in educating Florida teens about the lethality of fentanyl poisoning will be critical in maintaining and improving this downward trend for Florida and Brevard County.

Underreporting of Teen Deaths: A Data Gap

Why are teen deaths underreported?

- In cases of accidental overdoses, the cause of death may be recorded as “accidental” rather than “drug-related” in official reports.
- Families may request privacy, which can lead to incomplete public records.
- Medical examiners may not always test for fentanyl in all overdose or poisoning cases, especially when multiple substances are involved.

How severe is underreporting?

- If 17 officially reported teen drug deaths include 11 fentanyl-related cases, but many go unreported, the actual number may be significantly higher.
- A lack of complete data could underestimate the true extent of the crisis and delay necessary interventions.

Possible Solutions:

- Improved toxicology testing in all overdose and poisoning cases, regardless of age.
- Stronger public health transparency policies to ensure accurate data collection.
- Anonymous overdose or poisoning reporting systems to gather more realistic statistics.

Fentanyl death for teens is surging, and now is the time to talk about it.

- Teens have become the target of fake pills, and the number of fentanyl deaths is beyond alarming. We emphasize the importance of having conversations with your loved ones about this lethal threat.
- Teens have different reasons for using prescription pills, and experimentation often plays a part in kids’ lives. Reasons like curiosity or believing a pill can help them cope or help them with their studies can all be deadly.
- Fear often prevents people from helping. Teens must know the signs of an overdose or poisoning and call 911 for help. Good Samaritan Laws can protect those who call 911 to report an overdose or poisoning, and they will not be arrested, charged, or prosecuted.
- Drug traffickers make pills in all shapes, colors, and sizes that appeal to teens and use social media to distribute them. As a result, teens may think they’re getting a legitimate prescription medication such as Oxycodone, Adderall, or Xanax pills but instead are buying counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl and methamphetamine.
- Drug deals are no longer done just on the streets. Online platforms and all forms of social media are popular places for teens to purchase these pills. Snapchat is a platform that provides anonymity and disappearing content and does not allow third-party monitoring.
- Drug dealers can post anonymously with their “menu” and receive “orders” all of which will disappear, making it hard to track.



American Young Adults (20's) and the Exponential Jump

Over the past seven years, illicit fentanyl and other synthetic opioids have significantly impacted mortality rates among American young adults aged 20 to 29. The United States has lost 98,985 20-somethings to drug-related deaths. Of those, 65,344 (66%) are attributed to illicit fentanyl.

Florida 20-Somethings: The state of Florida has seen 6,202 overall drug-related deaths in the age group 20-29. Of those deaths, 4,140 (66%) were explicitly attributed to illicit fentanyl. Florida ranks #2 in the nation for overall drug and fentanyl-related 20-something deaths. Statewide, fentanyl accounts for 90% of drug poisoning deaths among young adults (ages 20-29).

The 20-Something Exponential Jump: A comparison of the youth data sets shows that teenagers are 10 times more likely to encounter a fatal drug-related death in their 20's than in their teens, and the likely substance they will encounter is fentanyl. The data represents a 980% increase in fatalities when transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood.

United States Total Drug-Related Deaths, Ages 20-29

State/Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
California	888	1,129	1,785	1,951	1,754	1,608	758	9,873
Florida	823	893	1,164	1,116	967	786	453	6,202
Texas	561	546	864	988	1,036	961	613	5,569
Ohio	840	838	1,005	867	772	612	314	5,248
Penn	899	781	805	789	670	551	213	4,708
Total US	13,177	13,074	17,128	17,890	16,342	13,913	7,461	98,985

Total Fentanyl Deaths, Ages 20-29

State/Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
California	246	503	1,167	1,415	1,312	1,219	483	6,345
Florida	449	548	838	809	703	552	241	4,140
Texas	81	104	325	524	618	591	284	2,527
Ohio	588	613	794	674	585	460	187	3,901
Penn	541	529	603	594	506	422	117	3,312
Total US	6,934	7,607	11,593	12,799	11,997	10,216	4,198	65,344

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Risk Factors Leading to this Surge:

- Increased access & experimentation:
- Many young adults experience newfound freedom (e.g., college, workforce, military), where exposure to drugs is more prevalent.
- Counterfeit Pills & Illicit Market Expansion:
- Fentanyl is often found in fake prescription pills (such as fake oxycodone, Percocet, or Xanax), which young people may take without realizing they contain lethal doses of fentanyl.
- Peer Influence & Risk Perception:
- Adolescents and young adults often underestimate the risks of street drugs. A single pill can be fatal due to fentanyl's extreme potency.
- Mental Health & Economic Stressors:
- Rising anxiety, depression, and economic instability post-pandemic may have contributed to increased drug use among young adults.

Predicting the Next 5 Years:

If these trends continue unchecked, Florida could see:

- An even greater rise in fentanyl-related fatalities among those under 30.
- A younger average age of poisoning victims, as fentanyl infiltrates high school and even middle school populations.
- More deaths occurring from first-time or occasional use, rather than long-term substance dependence.

Education is the Key: The analysis tells us that fentanyl education at the teen level is imperative prior to adolescents entering adulthood, where experimentation is more prevalent.

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Conclusion

The Path Forward:

Based on these findings, key recommendations for policymakers, educators, and health officials include:

Expand Fentanyl Education in Middle, High Schools, and Colleges

- Traditional drug education focuses on heroin, cocaine, and prescription pills.
- New curriculum should emphasize fentanyl's dangers, its presence in fake pills, and its unpredictability.
- Expand substance abuse treatment resources for young adults who may be at risk.

Increase Access to Naloxone (Narcan)

- Florida should expand Narcan availability in high-risk areas (college campuses, nightclubs, schools).
- First responders, teachers, and even students should receive training on overdose and poisoning response.

Public Awareness Campaigns on Fake Pills and Other Contaminated Drugs

- Many young people are unaware that counterfeit prescription pills can contain lethal fentanyl doses.
- Social media, influencers, and peers music industry partnerships could help spread this message.

Final Thoughts:

This data analysis highlights a growing fentanyl crisis in Florida, particularly among young people. Without immediate intervention, fentanyl-related deaths could continue to skyrocket in the next few years.

The key takeaway is that early education and proactive prevention strategies are crucial—once young people enter their 20s, the likelihood of fatal overdose or poisoning increases drastically.



**JUNIOR / SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ASSEMBLY
AND COMMUNITY / PARENT NIGHT
SYNTHETIC DRUG POISONING PREVENTION TRAINING PLAN**

Summary: This comprehensive prevention training plan is designed to equip junior and high school students, faculty, parents, and community members with essential knowledge and skills to make informed, responsible decisions about substance use and the synthetic drug poisoning epidemic. This multi-part presentation targets specific substances and overall drug prevention, fostering a safe and supportive learning environment. After the training, students, faculty, parents, and community members will have a solid foundation in modern drug education and the practical tools and confidence needed to navigate real-world situations.

Program Description:

Student Assembly, Duration 60-90 minutes: The heart of the program will be a student assembly held in the school auditorium or gymnasium. This assembly will include key presenter Suzy Pereira, a DEA Special Ambassador and founder of The Blue Plaid Society, guest speakers, and individuals with personal recovery stories who will share their insights and experiences. Students will be encouraged to engage in discussions, and interactive games will be incorporated to educate students on the risks and consequences of substance abuse. A Q&A session will allow students to ask questions and seek clarification on concerns. A resource table will be available to provide students with educational materials on substance abuse and take away items encouraging healthy living.

Parent / Community Night, Duration 60-90 minutes: A dedicated evening event will provide parents and community members with essential information and resources to support their children in making healthy choices. The parent/community night will include key presenter Suzy Pereira, a DEA Special Ambassador and founder of The Blue Plaid Society, experts in substance abuse prevention, and individuals with personal recovery stories who share their insights and experiences. In addition to the student presentation provided during the school day, parents and community members will be presented with an additional part of the program, Parenting Strategies for Drug Prevention and Communication. The audience will be encouraged to engage in open discussions, share their experiences and concerns, and learn from one another. A resource table will be available to provide attendees with educational materials on substance abuse, take away items encouraging healthy living, and free Narcan, the life-saving antagonist medication that reverses an opioid overdose or fentanyl poisoning.

Outcome: By combining a dynamic student assembly and a dedicated parent/community night, this program aims to create a comprehensive and impactful approach to substance abuse awareness and prevention for the student body and surrounding community. It seeks to empower students with knowledge and equip parents and community members with resources to address this critical issue effectively.