



DRUG OVERDOSES, FENTANYL, AND THE USE OF NALOXONE IN THE SAN DIEGO REGION

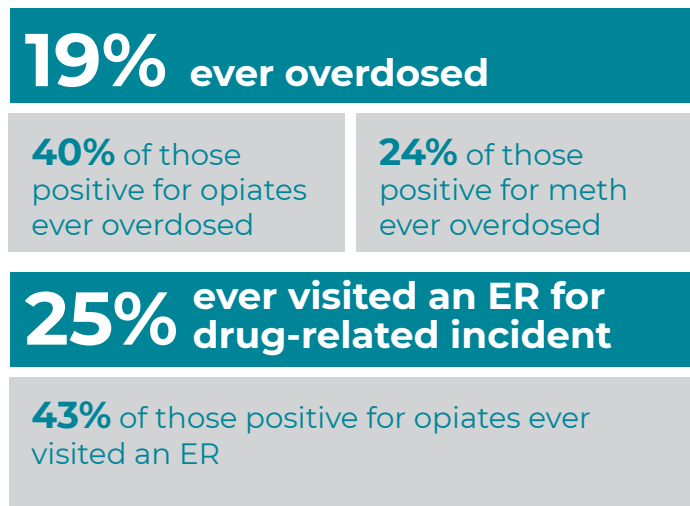
According to recently released data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),¹ California had more drug overdose deaths in 2020 than any other state (9,538) and ranked 6th in terms of the increase in number of deaths from 2019 to 2020 (up 46% from 6,538). Locally, statistics from the County of San Diego Department of the Medical Examiner² show that unintentional deaths due to drugs, medication, or alcohol increased 21% from mid-year 2019 to mid-year 2020, with methamphetamine the cause in 53% of these cases. Unintentional deaths that involved fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid similar to morphine, but 50 to 100 times more potent, increased by 126% during the same time period, with around 1 in 3 of these cases also involving the use of meth. With increases in substance use reported during the pandemic,³ more individuals using drugs in isolation, and the greater prevalence of fentanyl being mixed with other drugs on the street,⁴ this CJ Flash highlights recent analyses from interviews conducted with adults arrested and booked into local detention facilities in 2020 as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program.⁵

Highlight 1

Almost 1 in every 5 (19%) adult arrestees interviewed as part of SAM in 2020 reported they had ever overdosed on a drug and 1 in 4 (25%) reported ever having to visit an emergency room (ER) because of an alcohol- or other drug-related incident. Individuals who were positive for opiates were significantly more likely to report ever overdosing (40% versus 17%) and visiting an ER (43% versus 24%) than those who were not. Individuals who were positive for meth were also more likely to report ever overdosing (24% versus 13%). These statistics are important from a community perspective because of the direct and indirect impacts, demonstrating that drug abuse does not only affect the individual using the drug.

Figure 1

Adult Arrestees' Self-Reported History of Overdosing and Ever Visiting an ER for a Drug-Related Incident, 2020



¹ [cdc.gov/nchs/nyssr/drug-overdose-data.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nyssr/drug-overdose-data.htm)

² [sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/me/docs/ME-MidYearReport-Jan-Jun2020.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/me/docs/ME-MidYearReport-Jan-Jun2020.pdf)

³ [sandag.org/uploads/publicationid/publicationid_4777_29162.pdf](https://www.sandag.org/uploads/publicationid/publicationid_4777_29162.pdf)

⁴ According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), while fentanyl is often reported as a single drug entity, it continues to be observed in mixtures with other drugs, contributing to fentanyl's involvement not only in the opioid crisis, but also exacerbating the threat posed by other drugs. [dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DJR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DJR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf)

⁵ For additional information regarding SAM, please visit [sandag.org/sam](https://www.sandag.org/sam).



Highlight 2

Just under half (45%) of individuals who reported they had ever overdosed reported that they had been administered naloxone, a medication that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose. This percentage was 67% of those who tested positive for opiates at the time of the interview. As Figure 2 shows, around 2 in 5 of those ever administered naloxone reported receiving it two or more times and the entity most likely to have provided it was Fire/Emergency Medical Services, followed by friends, healthcare providers, and law enforcement. Providing naloxone offers an opportunity to engage an individual and sharing information regarding recovery. All five of the individuals who reported receiving it from a healthcare provider said that treatment information was provided, as did 7 of the 10 who received it from Fire/EMS and 3 of the 5 who received it from law enforcement.

Figure 2

Naloxone Administration to San Diego County Adult Arrestees, 2020

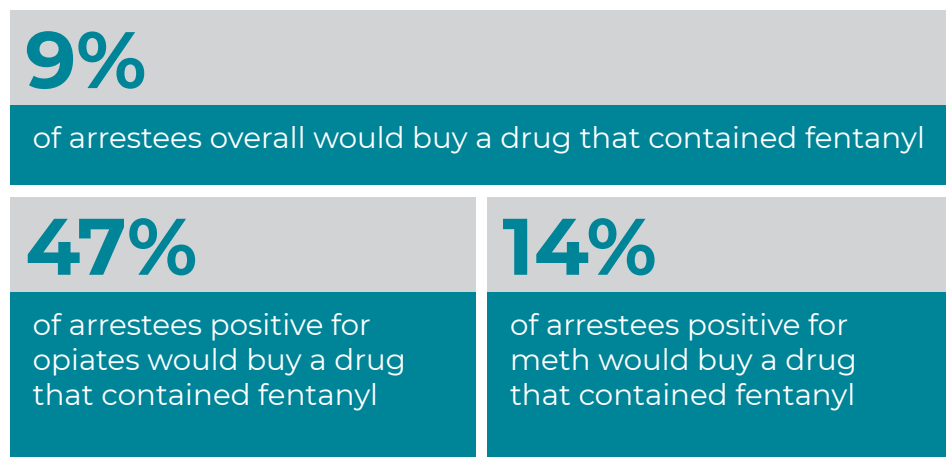


Highlight 3

Just under 1 in 10 (9%) of the adult arrestees overall reported they would purchase a drug intentionally if they knew it contained fentanyl. However, this willingness varied significantly by whether the individual tested positive for opiates or meth, with these individuals significantly more likely to report they would purchase it (47% and 14%, respectively), compared to those not positive for these drugs (5% and 4%, respectively).

Figure 3

Willingness to Buy a Drug That Contained Fentanyl



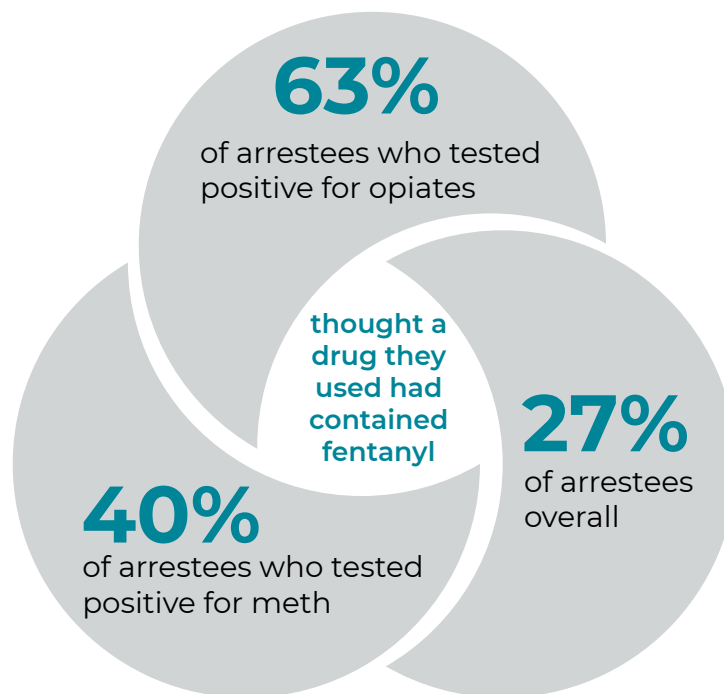


Highlight 4

Overall, just over one-quarter (27%) of the arrestees interviewed reported that they thought a drug they had purchased on the street contained fentanyl, because of the effect it had on them, even though this was not disclosed to them. However, this again varied significantly by whether the individual tested positive for opiates or meth, with these individuals significantly more likely to report they thought a drug contained it (63% and 40%, respectively), compared to those who did not test positive (23% and 12%, respectively).

Figure 4

Percent of Arrestees Who Thought a Drug They Had Used Contained Fentanyl



Takeaway

Drug overdoses are increasing dramatically nationally, a trend which has been exasperated by the pandemic (through drug use in isolation and decreased access to service providers) and is related to the growing prevalence of fentanyl on the street, both alone and combined with other drugs. With about 2 in every 5 arrestees who have been administered naloxone reporting they have received it more than once, this period of crisis offers opportunities to engage individuals in treatment. Reliable statistics should be compiled to inform the community regarding where and when overdoses are occurring and increased education and outreach should be conducted to inform the community about the risk that fentanyl poses to everyone due to its high potency.