



GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER
401 E Street, SW – 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20024



Opioid-related Fatal Overdoses: January 1, 2017 to November 30, 2023

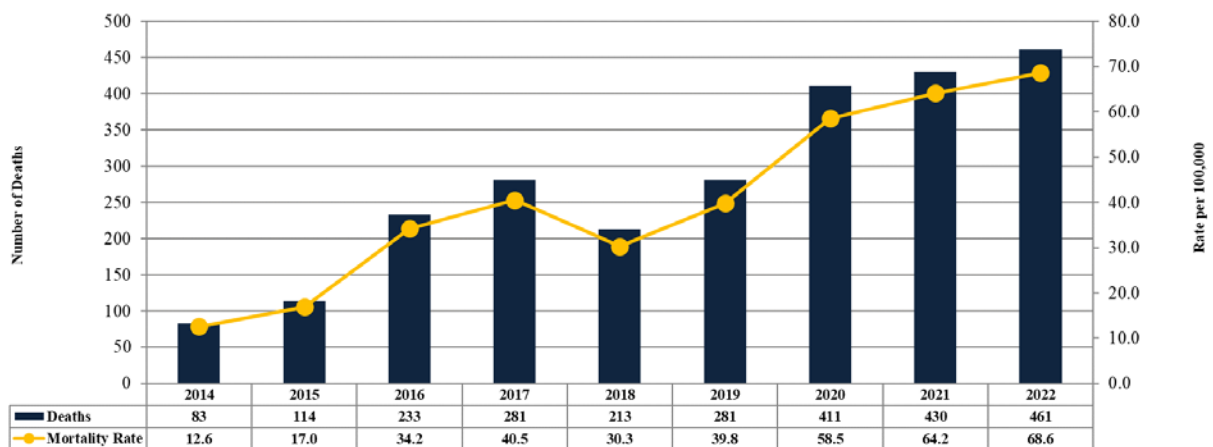
Report Date: February 20, 2024

The DC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) investigated a total of **2,548¹** deaths due to the use of opioids from January 1, 2017 through November 30, 2023. This report examines the presence of opioids (*heroin, fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, morphine, prescription opioids and the general category of opiates*) in deaths observed at the OCME.

Trends in Deaths due to Opioid Use

Similarly, to the rest of the country, the number of fatal opioid overdoses in the District increased between 2014 and 2017 (Fig.1(a)). Despite observing a decrease in fatal opioid overdoses in 2018, the number of opioid overdoses increased by 32% (n=281) in 2019. On average, there were 17 fatal opioid overdoses per month in 2018 and 23 opioid overdoses per month in 2019. **In 2022, there were 461 opioid-related fatal overdoses with an average of 38 deaths per month. There has been a total of 474 opioid-related fatal overdoses in 2023 year to date.**

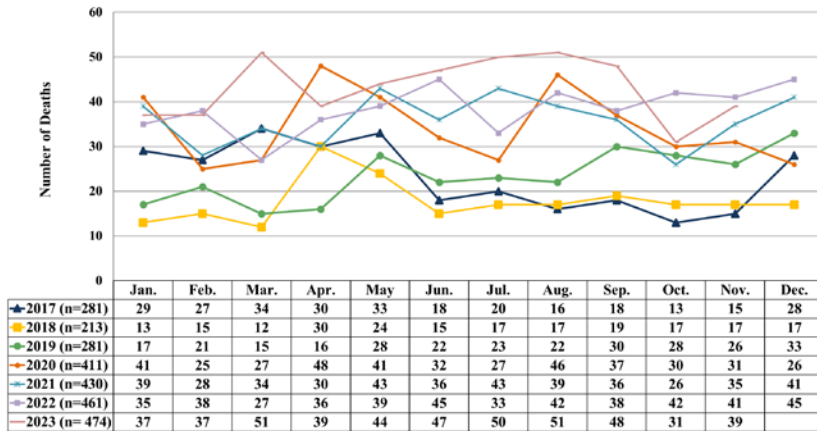
Fig. 1(a): Number and Mortality Rate of Opioid-Related Fatal Overdoses in DC by Year: 2014-2022



¹ The data presented in this report includes 33 cases with deaths due to opioid drug use where the Manner of Death was not "Accident": 5 cases in 2014, 2 cases in 2015, 4 cases in 2016, 5 cases in 2017, 2 cases in 2018, 3 cases in 2019, 6 cases in 2021, 4 cases in 2022, and 5 in 2023.



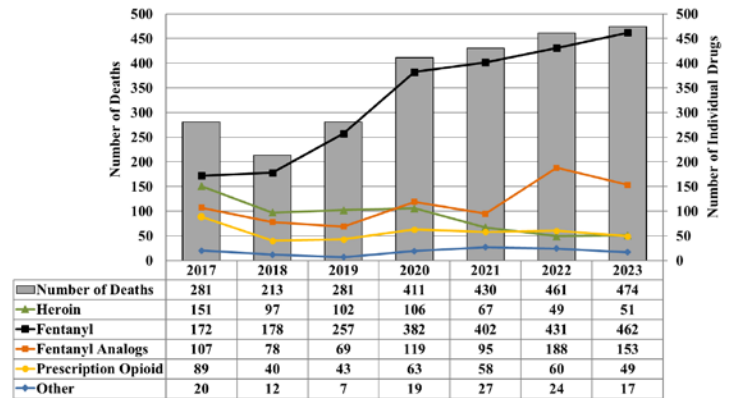
Fig. 1(b): Number of Drug Overdoses due to Opioid Use by Month and Year (N=2551)



Incidence of Opioids by Year

Figure 2 displays the illicit and prescription opioids identified through toxicology testing of the decedents from 2017 through November 30, 2023. In 2016, the most prevalent drug identified was heroin. However, beginning in 2017, the most prevalent drug identified is fentanyl. The most prevalent fentanyl analogs identified are furanyl fentanyl, p-fluoroisobutyl fentanyl, acetyl fentanyl and despropionyl fentanyl (4-ANPP).

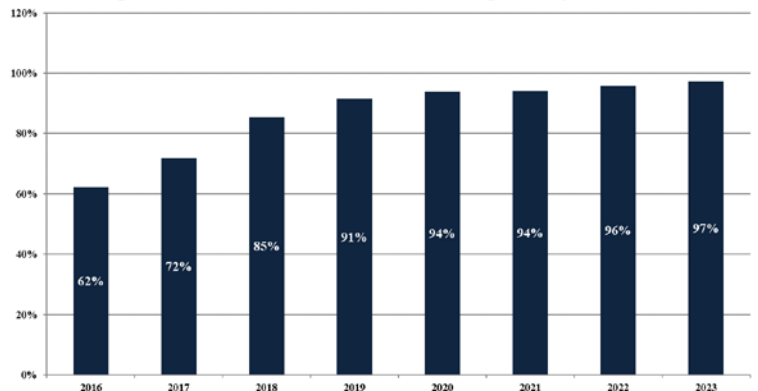
Fig. 2: Total Number of Opioid Drugs Contributing to Drug Overdoses by Year (All Opioids)



Increase in Fentanyl/Fentanyl Analogs in Opioid Overdoses

Figure 3 highlights the increasing percentage of cases containing fentanyl or fentanyl analogs. The percentage of cases containing fentanyl or a fentanyl analog has gradually increased since 2015. In 2016, 62% of cases involved fentanyl or a fentanyl analog. The noticeable increase in the presence of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs began in March 2016, with over half of the cases containing fentanyl.

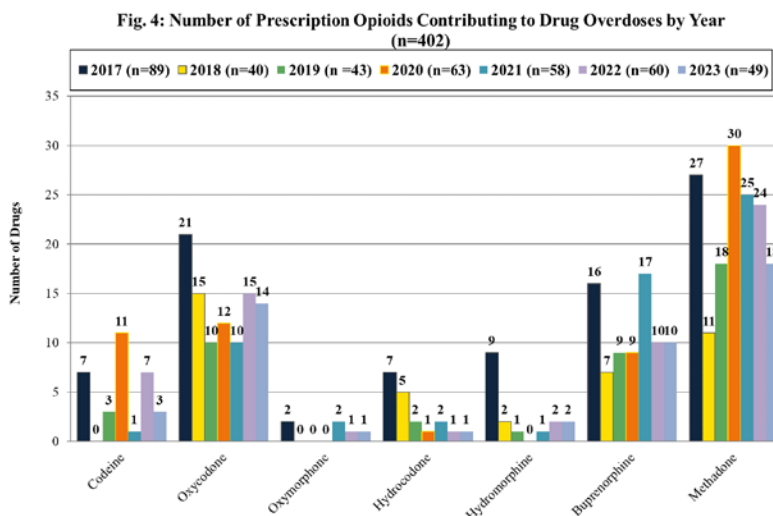
Figure 3: Percent of Overdose Deaths Involving Fentanyl 2016-2023



Polysubstance

Prescription Opioids

There were **402** prescription opioids found in the opioid overdoses from 2017 through November 30, 2023 (Fig. 4). The number of prescription opioids identified in fatal opioid overdoses decreased significantly between 2017 (n=89) and 2018 (n=40). However, the number of prescription opioids identified in fatal opioid deaths increased to 63 in 2020. Figure 4 illustrates that methadone and oxycodone are currently the most prevalent prescription opioids identified.



Emerging Drug Misuse and Mixed Use - Xylazine

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration², U.S. Food and Drug Administration³, and The White House⁴ have issued public health safety alerts regarding increased trafficking and lethality of xylazine mixed with fentanyl and other illicit drugs. Since 2020, OCME has observed an increasing presence of xylazine in opioid related deaths (Table 1).

Table 1. Opioid-Related Deaths Involving Xylazine	
Year	# of Deaths
2020	3
2021	6
2022	11
2023 (YTD)	13
Total	33

² <https://www.dea.gov/alert/dea-reports-widespread-threat-fentanyl-mixed-xylazine>

³ <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/fda-alerts-health-care-professionals-risks-patients-exposed-xylazine-illicit-drugs>

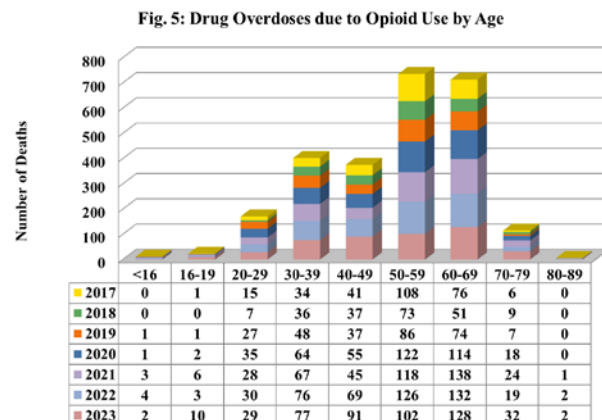
⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/briefing-room/2023/04/12/biden-harris-administration-designates-fentanyl-combined-with-xylazine-as-an-emerging-threat-to-the-united-states/>



Demographics

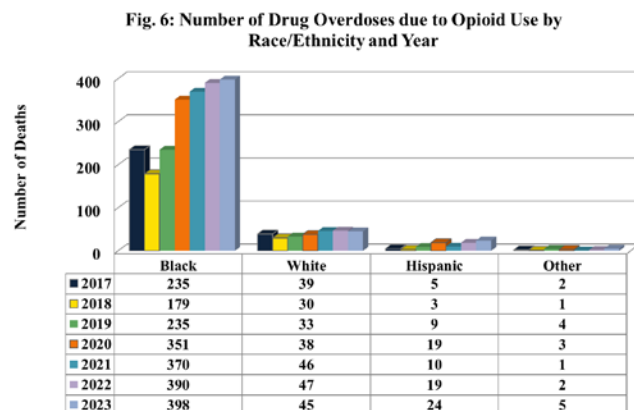
Age

Approximately **71%** of all fatal opioid overdoses occur among adults between the ages of 40-69 years old (Fig. 5). **29%** of deaths due to opioid use occurred among people ages 50 to 59.



Race/Ethnicity

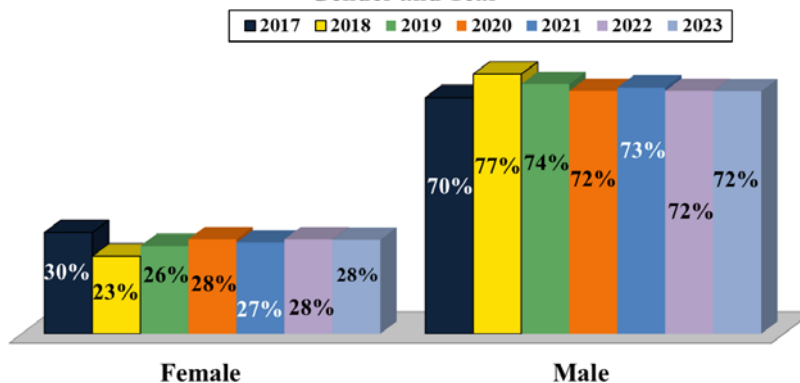
Overall, **2,158** or **84%** of all deaths due to opioid use were among Blacks (Fig. 6). This trend remains consistent across years.



Gender⁵

Fatal overdoses due to opioid drug use were more common among **males** (Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Percentage of Drug Overdoses due to Opioid Use by Gender and Year



⁵The data presented in this report includes 2 transgender female deaths; 1 case in 2022 and 1 case in 2023.



Jurisdiction of Residence

The majority of the decedents were residents of DC (Fig.8). From 2017 to November 30, 2023 overdoses were most prevalent amongst DC residents of **Wards 5, 7 & 8** (n=1,135) (Fig.9). However, there are variations across years.

Fig. 8: Number of Drug Overdoses due to Opioid Use by Jurisdiction of Residence and Year

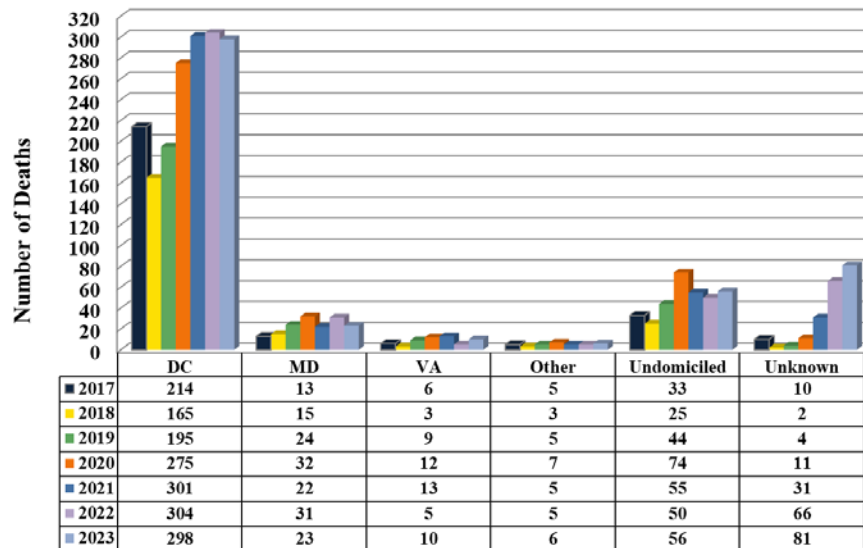


Fig. 9: Number of Drug Overdoses due to Opioid Use by Ward of Residence and Year

