Opioid-related Fatal Overdoses: January 1, 2014 to July 31, 2019

Report Date: August 21st, 2019

The DC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) investigated a total of 1018 deaths due to the use of opioids from January 1, 2014 through July 31st, 2019. 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

There was a steady increase in the number of fatal opioid overdoses between 2014 and 2017 (Fig.1a). However, the number of opioid overdoses in 2018 decreased by 17% compared to 2017.

The number of fatal opioid overdoses per month continues to decline in 2019 (Fig. 1b). In 2017, there was an average of 23 opioid-related fatal overdoses per month. However the number of opioid-related overdoses per month decreased to average 17 per month in 2018. **On average, there are 14 fatal opioid overdoses per month in 2019.**
Incidence of Opioids by Year

As depicted in Figure 2(a), there has been a steady increase in the total number of opioids found in fatal overdoses between 2014 and 2017. The majority of opioid overdoses were due to multiple drug toxicity, ranging from 1 to 7 opioids per death. The total number of opioids identified in the fatal opioid overdoses per year has ranged from 122 in 2014 to 403 in 2018. If current trends persist, there will be less opioids identified in the 2019 fatal opioid overdoses than were identified in the past three years.

Figure 2(b) displays the illicit and prescription opioids identified through toxicology testing of the 1018 decedents from 2014 to 2019. Overall, the most prevalent drugs identified were heroin followed by fentanyl, although the trend is reversed in 2017 and 2018. The most prevalent fentanyl analogs identified are furanyl fentanyl, p-fluoroisobutyryl fentanyl, acetyl fentanyl and despropionyl fentanyl.

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. In 2018, 85% of the cases contained fentanyl or a fentanyl analog.

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3 Morphine and fentanyl can both be prescribed. However, for the sake of this report, they are included under the illicit opioids.
Prescription Opioids

There were 278 prescription opioids found in the 1018 opioid related drug overdoses between January 2014 and July 2019 (Fig. 4). Despite the downward trend between 2014 (n=46) and 2015 (n=29), the number of prescription opioids identified in fatal opioid overdoses had increased steadily between 2016 and 2017 (n=63, 2016) (n=87, 2017). However, the number of prescription opioids identified in fatal opioid deaths has decreased to 39 in 2018. Figure 4 illustrates that methadone and oxycodone are the most prevalent prescription opioids identified.

Demographics

Age

Approximately 79% of all overdoses due to opioid drug use happen among adults between the ages of 40-69 years old (Fig. 5). Deaths due to opioid use were most prevalent among people ages 50 to 59 (n=38%).

Race/Ethnicity

Overall, 832 or 82% of all deaths due to opioid use were among Blacks (Fig. 6). This trend remains consistent across years.

Gender

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

The majority of the decedents were residents of DC (Fig.8). From 2014 to 2019 YTD, opioid-related fatal overdoses were most prevalent in **Wards 7 & 8** (n=375) (Fig.9). However, there are variations across years.