

**Families Against Fentanyl**  
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May 10, 2022

**Xavier Becerra**  
Secretary  
United States Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC, 20201

**Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky**  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA, 30329

Dear Secretary Becerra and Director Walensky:

As you are aware, the synthetic opioid epidemic continues to devastate communities across the United States. More than 100,000 Americans died by “overdose” last year and an estimated 70,000 of those were killed by synthetic opioid poisoning. As thousands more Americans die each month due to fentanyl poisoning, we write to express concern and to urge action to ensure that detailed, granular, real-time, *usable* synthetic opioid fatality, non-fatal overdose, and naloxone administration data is readily available.

Health professionals, first responders, policymakers and the public need more timely reporting on fentanyl poisonings, suspected fentanyl poisonings, and those populations at greatest risk in order to respond swiftly enough to prevent deaths. As our research team has taken the time to analyze and share existing data from the CDC’s Wonder database, it has become apparent that more comprehensive and timely data on synthetic opioid fatalities is needed in order to save lives, to understand and to respond to the full scope of the synthetic opioid epidemic. There is currently no centralized reporting on naloxone administration, and there is a six month lag in usable provisional fentanyl fatality data.

Our research findings reveal that fentanyl poisoning is a national emergency requiring the same level of monitoring accorded to the coronavirus. **We urge you to publish *usable* provisional fentanyl fatality data within six weeks of death, as the current six month lag prevents us from anticipating coming trends, and from responding appropriately to the existing situation. This should include weekly updates on synthetic opioid fatalities by state, age, and race, consistent with the schedule of reporting of COVID-19 deaths. Additionally, we urge you to collect and publish suspected fentanyl overdose deaths in real-time, in alignment with the timely reporting used throughout the coronavirus pandemic. Finally, to provide greater understanding of the crisis, we urge you to collect and publish data on naloxone administration and non-fatal fentanyl poisonings.** The evolving and emerging trends and threats of fentanyl poisoning must be much more widely publicized in order to save lives and to increase awareness among the American people as well as among representatives of federal, state and local governments.

Our findings are startling. Since 2019, synthetic opioid deaths (excluding methadone) have doubled across the United States,<sup>1</sup> and tripled among Americans ages 13 to 19. In that same period, deaths among Black teens increased five-fold. Media reports of synthetic opioid deaths among young children and infants are increasing at an alarming rate. Illicit fentanyl deaths disproportionately impact the Black community and are on the rise among Indigenous and Multiracial communities.<sup>2</sup> Real-time reporting of these trends could have increased public awareness, increased public investment in countering the crisis, especially in the hardest hit communities, and saved lives. Our research team found that fentanyl poisoning kills one American every 8.57 minutes. It is now the number one cause of death among Americans 18 to 45, surpassing COVID-19, suicide, and car accidents.<sup>3</sup> It is an important finding that should have been discovered and publicized by this Department sooner. Longstanding stigmas surrounding substance use and mental health, inequities in accessing comprehensive medical care, and the pandemic have all exacerbated the existing opioid epidemic. The number of deaths attributable to synthetic opioids have reached an unprecedented level, and in order to fully understand and respond to the trends and threats behind the data, it is imperative that the public has access to real-time, granular synthetic opioid fatality, non-fatal overdose, and naloxone administration data.

Dr. Rahul Gupta, current Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) recognizes the importance of real-time data tracking. In his confirmation address this past October, he stated, “President Biden has made clear that addressing addiction and the overdose epidemic is an urgent priority. As Director, I will diligently work to advance high-quality, data-driven strategies to make our communities healthier and safer.”<sup>4</sup> Since his confirmation address, Dr. Rahul Gupta has publicly applauded Maine’s data-driven approach to addressing the fentanyl epidemic in their state, and emphasized the critical role of real-time data in successfully combating the epidemic. Most recently, the ONDCP released a statement April 21, 2022 outlining the administration’s 2022 National Drug Control Strategy. One of the main points of the strategy centers around data, and specifically states, “Development of effective drug policy requires timely and rigorous data covering the full range of trends and activities, including consumption patterns, drug use consequences, prevention, harm reduction, treatment, recovery, drug production, transportation and distribution by drug trafficking organizations, and many more. The Strategy directs relevant agencies to strengthen existing data systems, establish new data systems, including for non-fatal overdoses, and enhance the usefulness of drug data for practitioners, researchers and policy-makers.”<sup>5</sup> To that end, it is essential that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention make available real-time, granular synthetic opioid fatality statistics and naloxone administration and distribution data. Doing so would allow clinicians as well as federal, national and local governments to proactively respond to the ongoing synthetic opioid epidemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Emmaline Herring, Moira Muntz, *Fentanyl by State: Report*, (Families Against Fentanyl, 2022), <https://www.familiesagainstoffentanyl.org/research/bystate>

<sup>2</sup> Emmaline Herring, Moira Muntz, *Fentanyl by Race: Report*, (Families Against Fentanyl, 2022), <https://www.familiesagainstoffentanyl.org/research/byrace>

<sup>3</sup> Emmaline Herring, Moira Muntz, *Fentanyl by Age: Report*, (Families Against Fentanyl, 2021), <https://www.familiesagainstoffentanyl.org/research/byage>

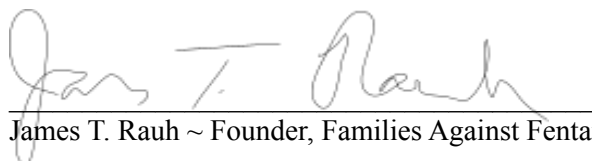
<sup>4</sup> The White House, “United States Senate Confirms Dr. Rahul Gupta as Director of National Drug Control Policy,” press release, October 28, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/briefing-room/2021/10/28/united-states-senate-confirms-dr-rahul-gupta-as-director-of-national-drug-control-policy/>

<sup>5</sup> The White House, “FACT SHEET: White House Releases 2022 National Drug Control Strategy that Outlines Comprehensive Path Forward to Address Addiction and the Overdose Epidemic,” press release, April 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/21/fact-sheet-white-house-releases-2022-national-drug-control-strategy-that-outlines-comprehensive-path-forward-to-address-addiction-and-the-overdose-epidemic/>

The Committee on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking released its “Final Report” February 8 of this year, in which they recommended in section 5.2.2 of their “Summary of Recommended Actions” that relevant agencies “provide greater granularity and timeliness in overdose death reporting.” The Committee further asserted, “ICD -10 codes are not reported with sufficient granularity to understand the specific synthetic opioid involved.”<sup>6</sup> The Committee’s recommendation calls on the CDC to utilize its resources in order to publish detailed, granular, and real-time data on synthetic opioid deaths. Publishing the aforementioned data would give government agencies, research organizations, nonprofits, and medical departments the tools necessary to deeply understand the scope of the epidemic. Linda B. Cottler, public health investigator and the final author of the paper, “Trends in seizures of powders and pills containing illicit fentanyl in the United States, 2018 through 2021,” recently stated, “To address the overdose crisis, you need real-time, high-quality drug surveillance data to inform the public health response.”<sup>7</sup> Understanding the breadth and root cause of the epidemic, as well as the efficacy of naloxone, would empower key players to draft a thorough, evidence-based, and comprehensive strategy intended to prevent future deaths.

It is time to act, to do everything in our respective powers to prevent future deaths. Synthetic opioids (excluding methadone) fatally poison thousands of Americans each month: 175 every single day. We urge you to act upon the requests outlined above, to publish detailed, granular, real-time fentanyl fatality data, non-fatal fentanyl “overdose” data, as well as naloxone administration and distribution data so our leaders have the knowledge necessary to defeat the synthetic opioid epidemic.

Sincerely,



James T. Rauh ~ Founder, Families Against Fentanyl

cc: United States Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek H. Murphy  
Director, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, Dr. Rahul Gupta  
Secretary, United States Dept. of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas  
Assistant Secretary, Health and Human Services, Preparedness and Response, Dawn O’Connell  
Response Coordinator, White House COVID-19 Response Team, Dr. Ashish Jha  
Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Nora Volkow

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<sup>6</sup> *Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking: Final Report*, (Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, 2022), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/external\\_publications/EP68838.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP68838.html)

<sup>7</sup> National Institute of Health, “Law enforcement seizures of pills containing fentanyl increased dramatically between 2018-2021,” news release, March 31, 2022, <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/law-enforcement-seizures-pills-containing-fentanyl-increased-dramatically-between-2018-2021>