

Cincinnati, Ohio area fentanyl overdoses increase by one thousand percent over the last five years

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Overdose deaths caused by the synthetic opioid Fentanyl in the Cincinnati area increased by one thousand percent over the course of the last five years, according to a new report in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

Fatalities attributed to fentanyl use in Hamilton County, which includes Cincinnati and its immediate suburbs, climbed from 24 in 2013, the first year area law enforcement began noticing its spread, to 324 in 2017. The narcotic, which is often mixed with methamphetamine, cocaine, or heroin, was found to be present in 90 percent of all drugs analyzed by the county crime lab through May of this year.

The Hamilton County coroner, Dr. Lakshmi Sammarco, told the *Enquirer* that the drug was responsible for 85 percent of all overdoses by opioids that her office handled in the last year.

Originally developed in the 1960s as a general anesthetic, fentanyl is a synthetic opioid which does not require the cultivation of poppies to manufacture. In subsequent decades the drug was further developed into a medication to treat severe pain in cancer patients, particularly those who had developed a high tolerance to other opioids. Said to be approximately 75 times as potent as the same amount of morphine, fentanyl was the most widely used synthetic opioid as of 2017.

Due to its widespread availability, potency, and the ability of illicit chemists to create analogs many times more powerful than the original drug—some are said to be 10,000 times as strong as morphine—use of Fentanyl in the US has skyrocketed. Initially used to lace other drugs, such as cocaine, or passed off as more popular narcotics, like heroin, fentanyl quickly became popular on its own among drug addicts who had become immune to the euphoric effects of less powerful

opioids.

In 2016, approximately 20,000 overdose deaths were attributed to fentanyl or half of the total opioid-related fatalities in that year. In spite of this grim statistic, use of the narcotic continues to grow. Derek List, a recovering opioid user in the Cincinnati area explained the psychology of the desperate addict to the *Enquirer*, “I know people who think, ‘If it kills me, it kills me. But my mission today is to get as close to the borderline of consciousness and death as possible.’”

The lethality of fentanyl has been so widely acknowledged that two states, Nevada and Nebraska, have sought to use the drug to execute prisoners.

According to the *Enquirer* report, most fentanyl found on the black market today is created illegally, supposedly in China and other countries. Regardless of its immediate country of origin, the responsibility for the recent surge in deaths attributed to the drug, and with the opioid epidemic as a whole, lies squarely with the pharmaceutical companies.

Those companies have spent decades developing and marketing powerful narcotics such as OxyContin and fentanyl as safe to treat a wide variety of ailments, including millions spent bribing doctors around the country to prescribe the drugs.

An article that appeared on May 29 in the *New York Times* detailed the efforts of one of the largest drug manufacturers, Purdue Pharma, to market the powerful opioid OxyContin in spite of a report that the narcotic was being widely used as a street drug.

“Company officials had received reports that the pills were being crushed and snorted; stolen from pharmacies; and that some doctors were being charged with selling prescriptions, according to dozens of

previously undisclosed documents that offer a detailed look inside Purdue Pharma. But the drug maker continued ‘in the face of this knowledge’ to market OxyContin as less prone to abuse and addiction than other prescription opioids, prosecutors wrote in 2006.”

Documents produced by federal prosecutors who were investigating the company in the early 2000s, obtained by the *Times*, indicate that not only were Purdue officials aware of the popularity of the drug on the streets but that they actually used that fact as a selling point when pitching the drug to doctors.

The article states: “Prosecutors found that the company’s sales representatives used the words ‘street value,’ ‘crush,’ or ‘snort’ in 117 internal notes recording their visits to doctors or other medical professionals from 1997 through 1999.”

These reports, and others detailing the street prices of both OxyContin and MS Contin, another opioid manufactured by Purdue, were seen by top company officials, including members of the Sackler family, who own Purdue.

Prosecutors at that time recommended bringing up three top Purdue executives on felony fraud charges. George W. Bush administration Justice Department officials declined to bring felony charges. Ultimately, three company executives pled guilty to misdemeanor “misbranding” charges and received no prison time. The company paid a \$634 million fine, a fraction of the billions in revenues generated by the company.

The fact that Purdue knew of the devastation it was causing but continued marketing its drugs as safe regardless of the consequences should come as a surprise to no one. Deaths from opioid overdoses quadrupled between 1999 and 2015. Studies published by the National Institute on Drug Abuse have established that the uninsured are twice as likely to engage in opiate abuse. Further studies have noted that patients who suffer from anxiety or depression account for 60 million of the 115 million opiate prescriptions written each year, or 51.4 percent.

The pharmaceutical companies are well aware of the prime market for their narcotics: workers whose living standards have been eroded by decades of declining wages, perpetual war, and a complete lack of political representation within the capitalist two-party system. It is in communities like Cincinnati, which has suffered the effects of years of deindustrialization and the social

misery that accompanies it that these companies find their most lucrative markets.



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