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New federal data indicate Mass. has a fentanyl problem

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 27, 2015

Massachusetts authorities made the second-highest number of seizures of fentanyl last year in the United States, highlighting concerns about the role the potent drug is believed to be playing in the sharp rise in opioid-related overdose deaths here.

Federal health officials this week issued an alert about sizable increases in some parts of the country — including Massachusetts — of both seizures of fentanyl and overdose deaths.

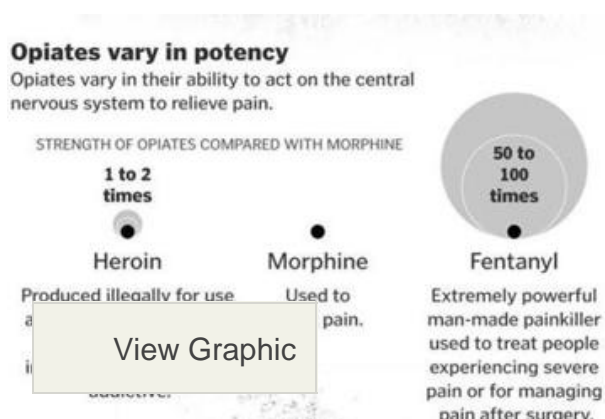
A synthetic, short-acting opioid, fentanyl is the most powerful opioid available for use in medical treatment and is estimated to be 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine and 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin, experts said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in their advisory that the trends have raised “serious concerns” and that the agency and the US Drug Enforcement Administration are investigating the situation.

The total number of confiscations of the drug by law enforcement, as reported by forensic



laboratories from around the country, was seven times higher in 2014 than it was just two years earlier, from 618 to 4,585 last year, according to data tracked by the National Forensic Laboratory Information System.



Why fentanyl-laced heroin is a lethal mix

Why fentanyl-laced heroin is a lethal mix and how it reaches drug consumers in New England.

More than 80 percent of the seizures last year were concentrated in 10 states, including Massachusetts, which had 630 reported fentanyl confiscations. That tally trailed only Ohio, where 1,245 were reported.

Fentanyl seizures and deaths attributable to the drug rose simultaneously in at least three states, Florida, Maryland, and Ohio, the agency said.

Top 10 states by total fentanyl seizures during 2014

Nationally, there were 4,585 such confiscations last year, up from just 618 in 2012.

Rank	State	Number of Fentanyl seizures
1	Ohio	1245

2	Massachusetts	630
3	Pennsylvania	419
4	Maryland	311
5	New Jersey	238
6	Kentucky	232
7	Virginia	222
8	Florida	183
9	New Hampshire	177
10	Indiana	133

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / National Forensic Laboratory Information System

an increase in opioid-related deaths in 2014 is attributable to fentanyl, according to the CDC.

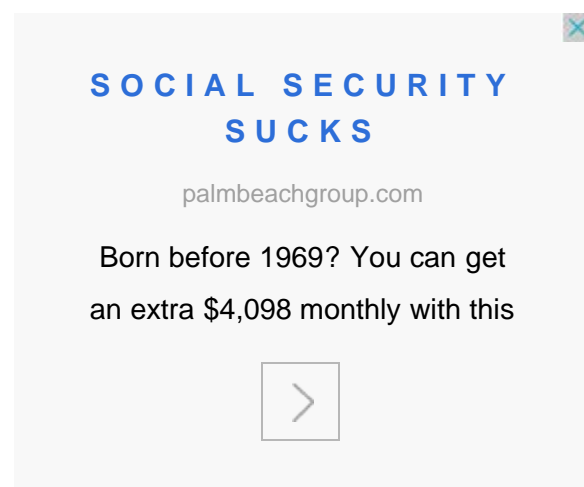
Governor Charlie Baker this month filed legislation aimed at trying to combat the opioid epidemic, and on Tuesday he and Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh wrote a letter to the Legislature urging them to pass the bill.

“The startling rise in fentanyl related-overdoses and opioid related-overdoses overall are concerning trends contributing to the deadly epidemic in our state,”

Elizabeth Guyton, a spokeswoman for Baker, said in a statement.

Attorney General Maura Healey said the new CDC advisory illuminated the need for Massachusetts to boost criminal penalties for trafficking fentanyl, which Healey and state lawmakers proposed in a bill in August. The legislation is pending.

“Fentanyl is a highly potent and deadly opioid, and its use is growing exponentially in our state,” Healey said in a statement. “We hope the Legislature will act soon to pass our fentanyl trafficking bill and give our state a new tool to address this growing epidemic.”



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State Police spokesman David Procopio said troopers and other local and federal law enforcement officials have been working to combat the spread of fentanyl.

“The increasing prevalence of fentanyl is a concern, and various State Police units are involved with our partner agencies in local and federal law enforcement to interdict fentanyl traffic from the street level on up to sophisticated drug organizations,” Procopio said in an e-mail.

Fentanyl can be made by pharmaceutical companies and administered by doctors to manage acute or chronic pain associated with cancer, the CDC said. The legal version of the drug has not typically been linked to overdoses.

Instead, overdoses are often the result of taking illegally-made fentanyl, which health officials said is often mixed with heroin and cocaine — sometimes without the user’s knowledge — to increase euphoric effects.

Procopio said the situation here is no different.

The fentanyl being sold in Massachusetts “is not medical grade. Rather, it is being manufactured in clandestine labs, often in Mexico, and trafficked over the southern border,” he said.

Dr. Daniel P. Alford, who directs the Clinical Addiction Research and Education Unit at Boston Medical Center, said his office had recently begun testing the 400-plus patients in an opioid treatment program for fentanyl during their regular drug screenings.

Normal drug testing would not detect the drug, he said.

Alford said so far only a small number have tested positive for fentanyl. But those who did said they were “completely unaware” that the drug they were taking was laced with fentanyl.

“I think it’s a teaching opportunity for our patients,” he said. “When you’re buying drugs off the street, you really have no idea what’s in there.”

Alford said he was not sure why illegal production and use of fentanyl has increased in popularity but suggested that the drug’s potency makes it easier to manufacture, store, and transport in smaller amounts.

And he said patients have told him that deaths are not bad for a drug dealer's reputation. In many cases, it helps their brand because it shows the dealer has powerful drugs.

"Which is kind of sick," said Alford.

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