

LOCAL NEWS

Fentanyl seized in Carolinas increased 15000% in two years, federal data shows

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At least 2,500 North Carolinians died from fentanyl overdoses last year, according to the latest state data out this month. The data is only through September of 2022 as the state's Department of Health and Human Services is still processing information for last year so it is likely this number will climb even higher.

The synthetic drug is now a major focus for law enforcement agencies across the state as it continues devastating communities in and families.

Over the last five years, the number of people dying from overdoses increased significantly. Fatal overdoses in North Carolina jumped 66% from 2018, [state data shows](#). Last year, the crisis claimed the lives of more than 4200 people in the state.

"Fentanyl is really the most dangerous thing that we've seen in decades," said Mike Prado, the deputy special agent in charge for Homeland Security Investigations in the Carolinas.

Prado says getting fentanyl off the streets is priority for the agency.

Last year in both North and South Carolina, federal officers seized 18.75 pounds of the synthetic opioid. That's more than they located the previous two years combined. Between 2020 and 2022, there was a 15,000% increase in the amount of fentanyl federal agents found.

In fact, when the department sent over the data which included the amount for 2020 – less than a pound, WRAL journalist doubled back, thinking the information was a mistake.

"That is not an error," Prado replied in the interview. "That is emblematic of the growth of fentanyl within Raleigh, specifically, and in the Carolinas as a whole."

The U.S. [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) notes that just 2 milligrams of fentanyl can be lethal depending on a person's body size, tolerance and past usage.

Given that information, Prado estimated the amount seized could claim the lives of every resident in both states three times over.

Toxicologists are hesitant of that claim.

"There is no set lethal dose of fentanyl for humans," said Dr. Ryan Marino, a toxicologist specializing in fentanyl research. "While the 2 milligrams that is quoted by sources like DEA can potentially be lethal to some people, there is massive variability in effect and especially in people who use drugs, who could even use 2 mg of fentanyl at a single time. In almost every case where this phrase is used, the drugs in question have not been tested for purity. Almost all fentanyl on the street is less than 10% pure fentanyl so even these estimations are at least an order of magnitude off."

Still, the jump in the amount of the drug seized is alarming. Prado says, much like major corporations are eying The Triangle, cartels, too, are recognizing the growth around Raleigh and Durham.

"Raleigh is uniquely situated because of the 95 corridor, the 85 corridor, and the interstates that run very close to nearby Raleigh," said Prado. "It's a place that fentanyl and other narcotics can easily be distributed throughout the Carolinas and beyond."

As the amount seized increased, so did the number of people who died so it's unknown just how much fentanyl is circulating around the state.

"The frightening part of that is that's only what we seized," said Prado. "That's not all of the fentanyl that does not account for all of the fentanyl that's actually in the Carolinas."

The data received from HSI shows fentanyl has really replaced the heroin market. The amount federal agents in the Carolinas seized last year was just a few ounces whereas the year before it was over 11 pounds.