

[Health](#)  
[public health](#)  
[State government](#)

## Families grieving fentanyl deaths to rally in support of new laws

By: [Joe Killian](#) - August 9, 2023 6:00 am



Fentanyl (Photo courtesy DEA.gov)

The Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina will rally at the N.C. State Capitol Building later this month, pushing for stronger penalties for illegal distribution of the synthetic opioid and more funding for early intervention, Naloxone and processing toxicology reports. They are also asking state lawmakers for opioid overdoses to be investigated as homicides.

As [NC Newsline has reported](#), North Carolina has been hard hit by fentanyl, an epidemic within the larger opioid epidemic. Some 13,671 North Carolinians have been killed by fentanyl in the last nine years, according to data from the N.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner — an average of eight people per day.

Even those numbers likely do not take in the full scope of the problem, medical experts say.

In North Carolina, death certificates don't have a specific code for fentanyl's involvement in a drug overdose. There is a code — [T40.4](#) — for "other synthetic narcotic overdose." The Epidemiology, Surveillance and Informatics unit of the N.C. Division of Public Health's Injury and Violence Prevention Branch notes that most of these cases are "due to illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogues," but can also include prescription fentanyl and other, less potent synthetic narcotics like Tramadol.

An analysis of statistics from the state medical examiner's office found overdose deaths with the T40.4 code rose from 442 in 2016 (the first year for which the office had such statistics) to 3,163 in 2021 — an increase of 616%.

As of April, [according to OCME data](#), there were 1,116 fentanyl-positive overdose deaths in the state so far this year.

## Fentanyl-Positive Deaths: 2016-2023\*

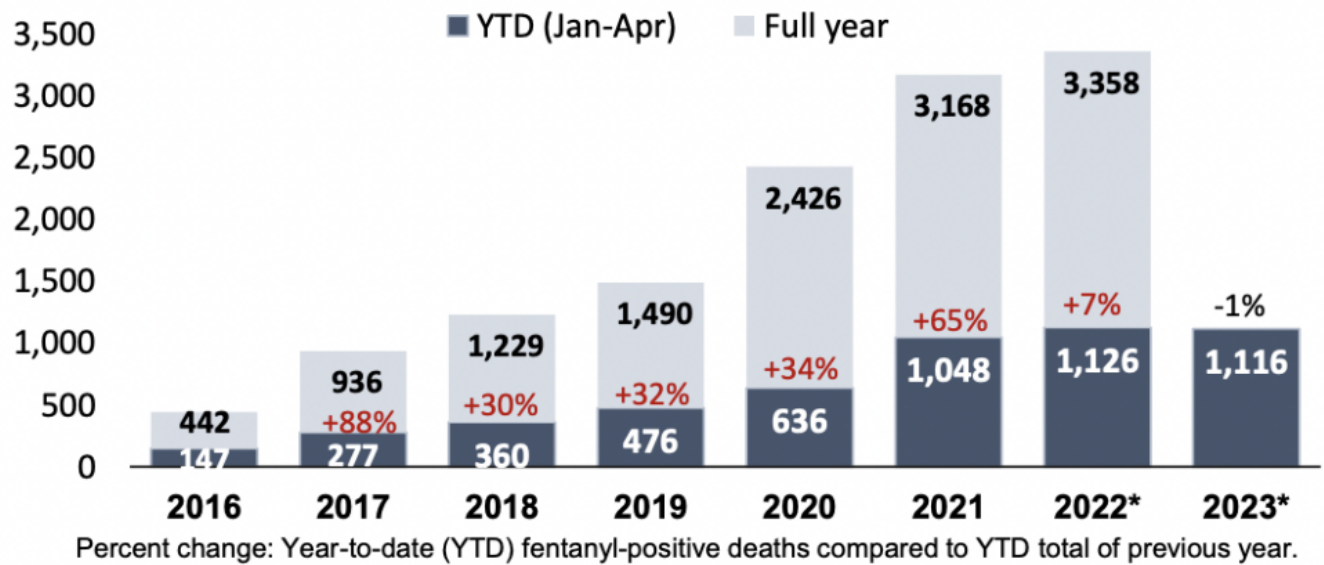


Image: Report from the N.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

“North Carolina’s communities and families are meeting the tragedy of overdose deaths and the opioid crisis head on, every day,” said Kody Kinsley, Secretary of North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, in [a statement on record-setting overdose deaths earlier this year](#). “With the right treatment and support recovery is possible, and individuals can go on to live full and productive lives. Our goal is to break the costly cycle of addiction and the smartest investment we can make to do that is expanding Medicaid.”

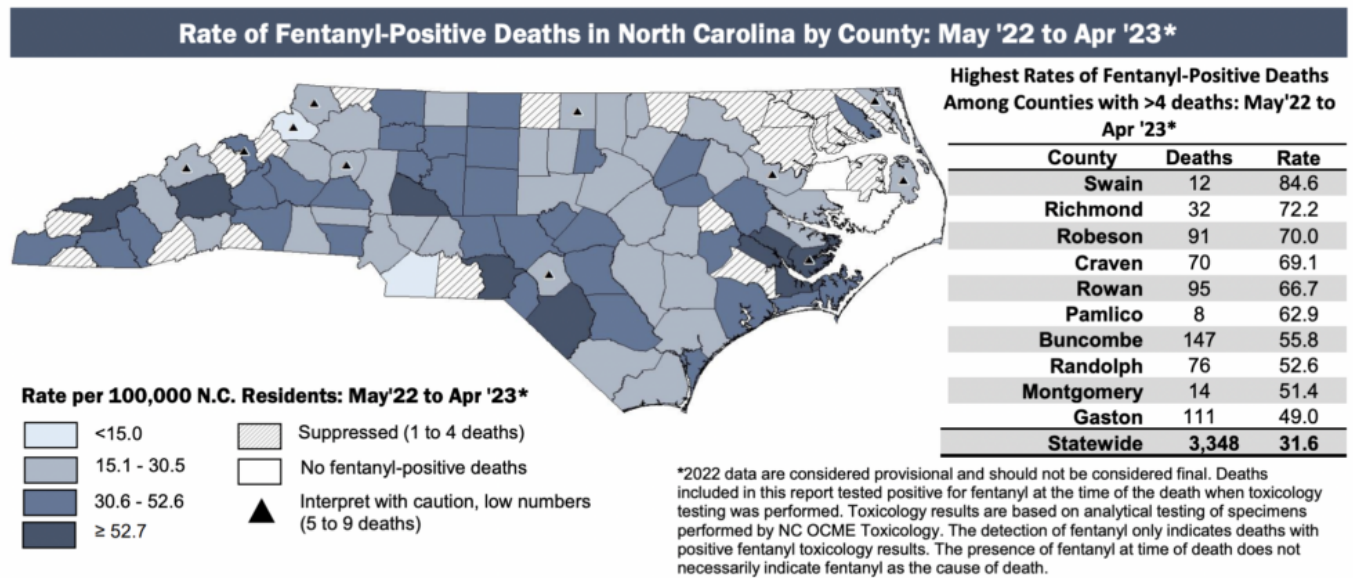


Image: N.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

Barb Walsh, executive director of the Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina, lost her daughter Sophia to fentanyl in 2021. Frustrated by the lack of tools that hospitals and first-responders have to help prevent overdoses, and that law enforcement has to prosecute deaths as homicides rather than accidental deaths, she and her group have been instrumental in pushing for changes to state law on both fronts.

Her group is now advocating for passage of [Senate Bill 189](#) and [Senate Bill 250](#), both of which would modify the state’s existing Death by Distribution law.

[SB189](#) would increase the fine amounts related to trafficking heroin, fentanyl and carfentanil, consolidate laws related to second-degree murder and death by distribution, create new offenses related to deaths caused by distribution of certain controlled substances, and establish a task force for enforcement of fentanyl and heroin violations. It would also expand the Good Samaritan immunity law in order to encourage people to call 911 to help avoid overdose deaths.

The Fentanyl Victims Network is also pushing for funding for and normalization of medical interventions proven safe and effective. A new study published Monday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found only one in five people with opioid use disorder have received established medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), including naltrexone, methadone and buprenorphine.

“Furthermore, some groups were substantially less likely to receive MOUD,” the study’s authors wrote. “In particular Black adults, women, those unemployed, and those in nonmetropolitan areas. Addressing disparities in MOUD uptake should be prioritized in program, policy, and clinical initiatives.”

In June, [Attorney General Josh Stein announced a \\$102.5 million multi-state settlement](#) with Indivior, maker of the opioid disorder medication Suboxone, over what he and 41 other attorneys general charged were monopoly tactics. North Carolina’s share of the settlement is \$2.96 million.

The attorneys general alleged Indivior attempted to preserve its dominance of the market by changing Suboxone from tablets to film and trying to destroy the market for tablets.

“When drug companies manipulate the market to make more money, they put people’s lives on the line,” Stein said in a statement. “It’s wrong and against the law. That’s why my fellow state attorneys general and I have taken action. This agreement will help ensure that people who need life-saving medication to address their substance use disorder can get it.”

Last year Stein, now running for governor, [announced the finalization of a \\$6.6 billion settlement with opioid makers](#) Teva and Allergan. Stein and other attorneys general charged that the companies downplayed the addictive nature of their prescription opioids and overstated their benefits.

“These settlements are just the latest step in our dogged pursuit of justice on behalf of people whose lives have been torn apart by opioid addiction,” Stein said in a statement. “I am proud to work alongside my colleagues around the nation to secure desperately needed resources. We are delivering significant funds to help people get the treatment and recovery services they need, and we’re not done yet.”

Stein has also supported stronger laws against the drug trafficking and distribution the Fentanyl Victims Networks has highlighted.

“They need to get deadly fentanyl off of our streets,” Stein said in a statement. “We can do more to hold accountable drug traffickers and keep the people of North Carolina safe. I’ll do everything in my power to rid our state of this scourge.”

The network’s rally will be held Sunday, August 20 from 2 to 4 p.m. at 1 E. Edenton St., in downtown Raleigh, the west side of the Capitol Building.

Republish

Our stories may be republished online or in print under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our web site. Please see our republishing guidelines for use of photos and graphics.