

## **FENTANYL DEATHS RISE FENTANYL DEATHS RISE MOM: COPS FAILED TO ACT ON OD - MOM: COPS FAILED TO ACT ON OD SON DIED LAST YEAR; NOW DRUG IS CRISIS**

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When Justin Wortmann's life ended in December in a White Castle parking lot after he took a dose of heroin, it was a silent warning about an unprecedented crisis now bubbling over in metro Detroit.

His mother, Janice Wortmann of Plymouth Township, learned from autopsy results 8 weeks later that the killer actually was a drug called **fentanyl**. She called police in Taylor, where her son died Dec. 27.

"The detective told me they didn't have the manpower to look for a dealer, that they were on every street corner," she said.

Police responded that they tried, to no avail.

Now, the body count of people suspected of overdosing on a mix of heroin and **fentanyl** is rising - and an urgent search is on.

Wortmann, 47, wonders whether the **death** of her 26-year-old son could have been prevented.

"Maybe if they took me seriously they could have gone to the source," Wortmann said Wednesday. "Maybe this wouldn't be happening now."

Local toxicologists say they've seen a steady increase in **fentanyl**-related **deaths** since last fall, but nothing prepared them for the jump that began last week: At least 23 people have died in Wayne County since May 18 from what investigators believe was a lethal combination of heroin or cocaine and **fentanyl**, a prescription painkiller typically given to terminally ill patients for pain.

Now, as Michiganders gear up for the long holiday weekend and outdoor activities, county and Detroit officials are scrambling to get the word out about the drug's dangers.

Workers are distributing flyers in areas known to be frequented by drug users that warn of the dangers of using heroin or cocaine laced with **fentanyl**, which they might not be aware they are buying.

If the numbers from the past week prove true, **fentanyl** experts agree: The rash of Wayne County **deaths** is unprecedented.

"It's amazing," said Bruce Goldberger, director of toxicology at the University of Florida, who has published several studies on **fentanyl** abuse. "I've seen **fentanyl deaths**, but not in terms of the outbreak you have."

As a result, Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said Wednesday that her office is prepared to charge with murder the dealers of the deadly mix of drugs, and authorities acknowledged they're navigating new territory as they hunt for the dealers.

Tracking down the dealers won't be easy, officials said.

Detroit Police spokesman James Tate said police are fielding numerous tips about the sale of the heroin- **fantanyl** mix. No arrests were made as of Wednesday.

Lawrence Meyer, chief of field operations for the Wayne County Sheriff's Office, said he has never seen a similar case in his 30 years in law enforcement. He and other investigators first had to learn about **fantanyl** itself, and then how it's distributed.

"We're just at the point where we're sorting all the records," he said. "Our investigators are pulling records ... on the victims and we're trying to establish a nexus with a distribution point or source."

"We're talking to victims' relatives, their associates, their friends. We're just at the preliminary stages."

Law enforcement and medical officials said the most likely source is an illegal lab.

"It's probably clandestinely manufactured," said Daniel Isenschmid, chief toxicologist with the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office. He said a change in the **fantanyl** -to-heroin ratio might explain the rising body count.

Goldberger agreed the **fantanyl** is probably homemade. "You can synthesize it if you're a good chemist," he said.

**Deaths** linked to **fantanyl** -laced drugs have been reported in smaller numbers in cities across the country, including Chicago and Philadelphia, and investigated by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency since last fall.

Investigators from the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention arrived Monday in Detroit to gather information. They're expected to stay at least through the week - and possibly longer - to comb through medical records and toxicology reports and to conduct interviews.

"This is the first time we have taken a look at heroin overdoses connected to **fantanyl** ," said Bernadette Burden, a CDC spokeswoman, who said the agency typically doesn't give a time frame for investigations. "This is new territory for CDC investigators."

Authorities learned of another Wayne County drug **death** Wednesday that might also be linked to **fantanyl** .

County officials would not release the names of the victims Wednesday or the specifics about where they died, offering no explanation. They insisted the Free Press file a Freedom of Information Act request.

The true **death** count won't be known until toxicology reports are completed in the next few weeks, but officials with the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office said some of the bodies showed telltale signs - including syringes still stuck in victims' arms, indicating the type of sudden **death** that a **fentanyl** overdose causes.

Oakland County confirmed 20 such **deaths** from Sept. 28 through early April. Most of those **deaths** were from Genesee County, which does not have its own medical examiner.

Drug-related **deaths** in Macomb County have risen in recent weeks, said Medical Examiner Daniel Spitz, but he won't know if the **deaths** are linked to **fentanyl** until toxicology reports come back in another week or so.

In the Taylor case involving Justin Wortmann, from Dearborn, police said they searched for the drug dealer but were unsuccessful.

"We understand she's a grieving mother, but detectives worked on the case to get to the bottom of it," said Jac Desrosiers, Taylor's director of police services. "It's hard to accept the fact that it happened, but our detectives don't let these cases slide."

CDC investigators have to confirm the **deaths** truly are linked to **fentanyl** , and then they'll help state and local authorities develop guidelines to try to halt the carnage.

Gary Kunsman, chief forensic toxicologist for the Oakland County Medical Examiner's Office, has been tracking **fentanyl** -related **deaths** since Sept. 28, when the first of seven victims arrived at the morgue in a three-week period.

"It's been sort of steady since," Kunsman said. He said three of the 20 total cases came from the Pontiac area; the rest were from Genesee County.

Kunsman reported the cases to the crime lab in the county sheriff's office so the lab could test for the potentially lethal combination.

Isenschmid said he also noticed an increase in **fentanyl** -related **deaths** in Wayne County beginning last fall.

Isenschmid's office usually confirms **fentanyl** as the cause of **death** through standard toxicology tests, which can detect the drug in "high-therapeutic" doses - or amounts at which patients might legitimately be using the drug.

In response to the recent **deaths** , however, the office plans to begin a new screening test that will detect **fentanyl** faster and in smaller quantities.

"We'll have the results of a screen in less than a week," Isenschmid said.

Janice Wortmann, whose son died in December, said she has relived the loss because of the **deaths** in the past week.

"This should not be happening at all. It shouldn't have happened to my son," she said. "I know exactly what these parents are going through."

(SIDEBARS)

#### WHAT'S HAPPENING

\* Another person died Wednesday in Wayne County of an overdose possibly related to the painkiller **fentanyl** .

\* Wayne County authorities would not release the names of the 23 people whose recent **fentanyl** -related **deaths** sparked a public health alarm.

\* The drug could be coming from an illegal lab, investigators said.

\* Wayne County authorities are prepared to charge dealers with murder.

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION: Justin Wortmann

MEMO: SIDEBARS ATTACHED

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