

MOST FENTANYL VICTIMS OLDER - RECORDS DETAIL DEATHS, SHOW MANY MALE, WHITE

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The **victims** of a powerful painkiller blamed in scores of deaths in metro Detroit were **most** often middle-age, **most** frequently men and typically white. It struck equally among those living in the suburbs and the city.

Records released Friday by the Wayne County Medical Examiner's office on 110 deaths related to the drug **fentanyl** from September 2005 to the beginning of June painted a **more** vivid picture of the **victims**, **many** of whom died when the drug was mixed with heroin or cocaine to produce a **more** intense high.

According to case summaries, autopsies and toxicology reports reviewed by the Free Press, the **victims** ranged in age from 19 to 60 and lived in 21 communities, including Detroit. But **more** than half were between the ages of 41 and 55. And in 82 records where hometowns were clearly identifiable, as **many** people who died claimed homes in the suburbs as in the city.

White people accounted for two-thirds of those who died during the period. Of the 110, 75 were men.

The records, sought by the newspaper under the Freedom of Information Act, were incomplete: **Many** details, including names, addresses and other vital information, were removed by authorities, who claimed the release of those details would hamper ongoing criminal investigations. Hometowns were indicated in 82 of the case summaries, however.

The picture drawn from the documents is an accurate one, officials said.

"Drug abuse is an equal opportunity destroyer," Dr. Michele Reid, chairwoman of the Wayne County **Fentanyl** Work Group, said Friday. "This just goes to show you the general vulnerability of the population."

Fentanyl deaths have swept several cities across the nation this year. In Wayne County alone, authorities have blamed at least 130 deaths on the drug since the beginning of 2005.

The records released Friday accounted for fewer deaths because some cases were not released pending lab reports. The 110 deaths reviewed by the Free Press also did not include **fentanyl** - related suicides or natural deaths where the drug showed up in testing but was taken for legitimate medical uses.

The **victims** in the cases reviewed died from injecting, snorting and smoking **fentanyl** or using **fentanyl** with other drugs. A few ate a gel containing the drug from patches typically prescribed to give regulated doses of the painkiller through the skin.

The records provided a glimpse of the ways in which the drug claimed its **victims**. Bodies were found on floors, on stairways and on porches; they were found sitting on toilets. Frequently, they were found frothing from the mouth and nose.

Several **victims** were found with underwear around their ankles after apparently injecting themselves in the groin. Two were found dumped along city streets and one on a freeway service drive.

Many were found dead in bed.

In one case in April, three young users were found dead together in a car in Detroit. Two of them apparently died while having sex in the front seat.

All told, **fentanyl** played a role in the deaths of 71 white people, 38 African Americans and one Hispanic. Male **victims** outnumbered women 75 to 35.

While authorities made public warnings about **fentanyl** this May, numbers began spiking last November, when deaths associated with the drug jumped to 16 from seven a month earlier. The death toll ran in double digits through February, dropped in March and April, and soared to 24, the peak month, in May.

But as early as January, the medical examiner's office was hearing concerns.

One report details how the daughter of a 52-year- **old** woman who overdosed called shortly after her mother's death and said two **more** drug users in their neighborhood had died. The document does not indicate whether the official who took that call shared the information.

Still, Reid said Friday, "there wasn't enough evidence to go public with it any earlier. There just was not a critical mass before May."

That's when local officials warned that **fentanyl** was showing up in dangerous quantities, mixed with heroin and cocaine.

Police said dealers have capitalized on the scourge, branding their goods in packages named Drop Dead and Suicide Packets.

At least one user wasn't scared by the warnings: Records show a 27-year- **old** Detroit resident discussed with his girlfriend a "new mix of drugs and that it was killing people in the Detroit area." He was dead within hours.

SIDEBAR

How to get help

For **more** information on drug abuse, go to www.drugfreedetroit.org or www.semca.org. A statewide substance abuse hotline is available at 888-736-0253.

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ILLUSTRATION: Chart KOFI MYLER Detroit Free Press

MEMO: SEE CHART OF **VICTIM** PROFILES IN MICROFILM PAGE 3A;SIDEBAR ATTACHED

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