

**TO:** Boston Area Healthcare Providers

**FROM:** The Massachusetts Department of Public Health and The Boston Public Health Commission

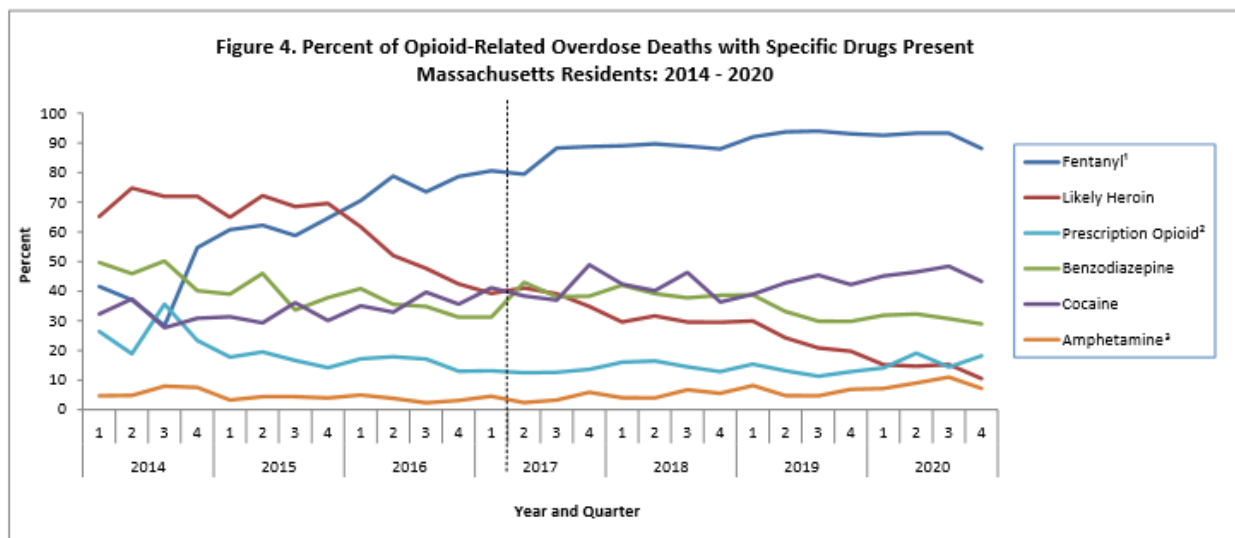
**DATE:** May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021

**RE:** Increase in fatal overdoses among persons who use drugs in Boston during the COVID-19 pandemic.

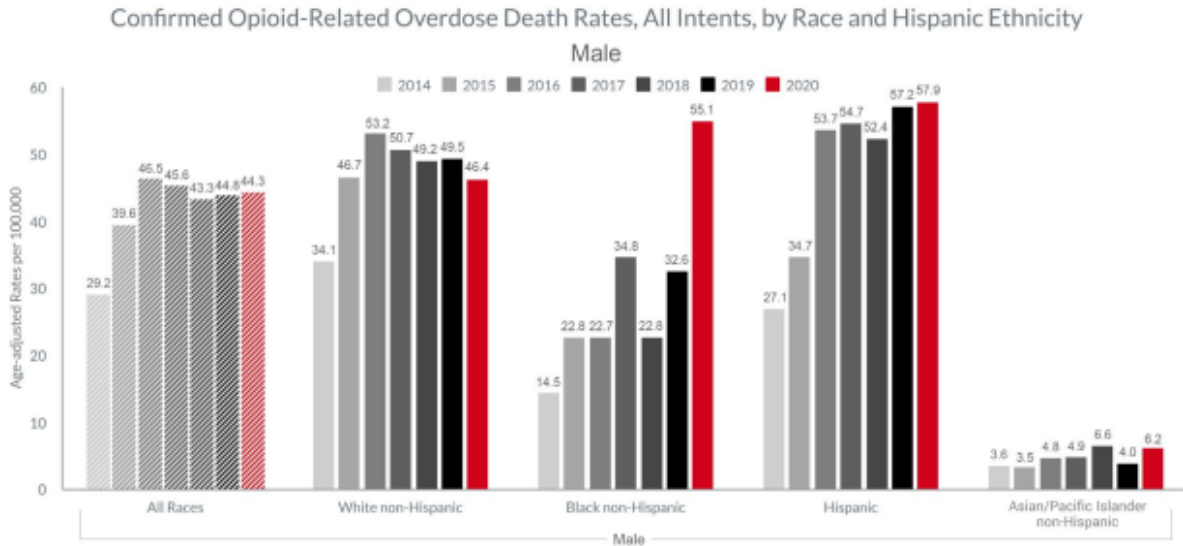
The Department of Public Health (DPH) and the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) are reaching out to treatment providers, hospitals, and health centers in response to the recently [published bi-annual opioid report](#). The data shows a dramatic increase in fatalities for the first time since 2016. This is most evident in the City of Boston.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a disruption to healthcare, social services, and public health systems, which has had a devastating impact on Boston’s most vulnerable residents and exasperated the ongoing opioid epidemic. More specifically, Black male residents are the most burdened by the co-occurring public health emergencies. The ensuing data highlights the health inequities in Boston among residents of color that use drugs.

- Fentanyl remains a key factor in opioid-related overdose deaths.
- In 2020, Fentanyl was present in 92% of overdose related toxicology screens (see below figure).
- Nearly half (46%) of opioid-related overdose deaths had cocaine present.
- There were increases in opioid-related overdose deaths in both males and females as well as adults aged 25 and older.
- The rate of overdose death increased significantly among Black non-Hispanic men, rising from 32.6 per 100,000 in 2019 to 55.1 per 100,000 in 2020 (see below figure).



Source: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/opioid-related-overdose-deaths-among-ma-residents-may-2021/download>



Source: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/opioid-related-overdose-deaths-demographics-may-2021/download>

It is critical that we increase efforts across all treatment programs, healthcare, and partner institutions so that we may remain accessible for those most at risk of overdose, and continue to provide essential services.

## Recommendations:

### Remain Alert to the Potential for Fentanyl to be in any of the Drug Supplies

While it is most commonly found in the opioid supply, fentanyl is present in most drug streams, including that of stimulants. Please inform patients that are using drugs that they are at risk of an opioid overdose, even if they are using stimulants and should always carry naloxone on their person.

To ensure the safest possible use, refer patients to local syringe service programs (please see list below) who may be able to give out fentanyl test strips to test supplies.

### Ensure Patients Who Access ANY Street Purchased Drugs Have Naloxone

Encourage patients/clients who use drugs, as well as their family and friends, to carry naloxone. Prescribers should prescribe naloxone to patients who knowingly use drugs or are prescribed opioids. Naloxone is available at pharmacies per the [statewide standing order](#). MassHealth and many other insurers will cover the cost of naloxone prescriptions at the pharmacy. For more information on how to access naloxone in MA, please visit: <https://www.mass.gov/naloxone>.

## **Be Prepared to Refer Patients Who Use Drugs to Syringe Service Programs and Harm Reduction Agencies**

Harm reduction agencies, including syringe exchange programs, meet the needs of these patients by supplying them with sterile injection equipment, connection to HIV/HCV/STI testing and treatment, and connection to medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD). These programs will also be able to supply the patient with naloxone. For a list of current syringe service programs, please see below.

Given the co-occurring increases in overdoses and HIV cases, it is essential to encourage frequent HIV, HCV, and syphilis screening for people with injection drug use and other high risk behaviors, especially patients seeking care in emergency departments, even among those who were recently tested.

## **Refer Patients with Substance Use Disorder to Treatment**

Refer patients/clients who use substances to treatment. You can direct them to treatment and recovery resources at the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline 800-327-5050 (<https://helplinema.org/>). For Boston area providers, please encourage patients to call 311 or use the 311 app to be connected to treatment services. For a list of services, please see below.

## **For a Current Listing of Substance Use Disorder Treatment Programs**

<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/substance-abuse/providers/substance-abuseservices.html>

## **For a Current Listing of Syringe Service Programs**

<https://www.mass.gov/syringe-service-programs>