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Polysubstance Use and Deaths Related to Fentanyl and Xylazine

The most recent report from the Florida Medical Examiners Commission (MEC) showed that among decedents in Broward County, occurrences of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs continued to increase. In the first 6 months of 2021 there were 320 fentanyl related deaths and there were 233 fentanyl analog related deaths, representing a nearly 4% and 26% increase, respectively, from the same time period in 2020. Among these decedents, the average age was 42, 78.2% were men, 10% were African American/Black, 10% were Hispanic, 79% were white, and the remainder identified as another race/ethnicity.

As seen in the chart to the right, polysubstance use is common in fentanyl related deaths in Broward County. The average number of substances identified among fentanyl decedents was 3.7, with a range of 1-9 substances identified. Cocaine the most prevalent co-occurring substance (50%), followed by alcohol (26%), and benzodiazepines (20%).

Polysubstance use among fentanyl-related deaths		
Substance	N	%
Cocaine	159	50.0%
Alcohol	83	25.9%
Benzodiazepines	65	20.2%
Rx opioids	55	17.1%
Heroin	54	16.8%

The Florida MEC report also documented deaths related to xylazine, a non-opioid veterinary tranquilizer, which is increasingly being used in combination with fentanyl. Data suggest that xylazine increases the duration of the desired central nervous system effects of fentanyl. Of the 112 xylazine-related deaths in Florida available for analysis, 100% included fentanyl, followed by cocaine (54%) and methamphetamine (33%).

Polysubstance use among xylazine-related deaths		
Substance	N	%
Fentanyl + analogs	84	100%
Cocaine	34	53.6%
Methamphetamine	28	33.3%
Cannabinoids	26	30.9%
Alcohol	23	27.4%

According to the CDC, polysubstance use is increasing, including intentional use (i.e., combining two or more substances to produce a desired psychoactive effect) and unintentional use (e.g., a substance may be laced with one or more other drugs; cross contamination in which fentanyl or other substances are inadvertently added to a drug during shipment or handling). Because of the potency of fentanyl and analogs, polysubstance use greatly increases risk of overdose. As seen locally, trends indicate increasing co-use of fentanyl and stimulant drugs, like cocaine. Moreover, the emergence of xylazine in polysubstance use is also a concern as it also causes respiratory depression and greatly increases the risk of overdose.

Sources: Data from the Florida Medical Examiners Commission 2021 Interim Annual Report; https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/other-drugs.html#anchor_1636146406061

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