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Posts exaggerate adult fentanyl deaths in the U.S.

By JOSH KELETYAugust 24, 2022



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CLAIM: Fentanyl is the leading cause of death for adults in the U.S.

AP’S ASSESSMENT: False. Fentanyl overdose deaths, while high, are not the leading cause of deaths among all adults in the U.S., experts say. Heart disease and cancer kill more people, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

THE FACTS: Social media users, including some Republican elected officials, have claimed online in recent days that fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is the No. 1 killer of adults in the U.S.

“Fentanyl is the leading cause of death among American adults,” Rep. Beth Van Duyne, R-Texas, wrote on Twitter on Friday. “Until @POTUS secures our southern border, this crisis will only get worse.”

The congresswoman’s tweet, which garnered more than 2,000 likes, was also shared by House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

This is not the case, according to experts and CDC data.

“It absolutely is not the leading cause of death for all adults,” said Kenneth Leonard, director of the University at Buffalo Clinical and Research Institute on Addictions.

“I wouldn’t minimize fentanyl as a problem, but it’s certainly hard to say it’s the leading cause of death,” said Lewis Nelson, a professor of pharmacology, physiology and neuroscience at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School.

That distinction goes to “two biggies from history,” heart disease and cancer, said Dan Ciccarone, a professor of family and community medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. “It’s been true for a couple of generations now.”

About 71,000 people died from overdosing on synthetic opioids like fentanyl in 2021, up from almost 58,000 in 2020, according to [the CDC](#). In comparison, the CDC estimates that in 2020, almost 700,000 people died from heart disease, roughly 600,000 from cancer and around 350,000 due to COVID-19.

Spokespeople for McCarthy did not respond to the AP’s request for comment. Andrea Coker, a spokesperson for Van Duyne, wrote in an email that while heart disease may be the leading killer of older American adults, the “cdc is stating fentanyl is the leading cause of death for Americans 18-45.”

As part of her response, Coker provided a link to an analysis conducted by the Ohio-based nonprofit Families Against Fentanyl that determined fentanyl was the top killer of people ages 18-45 in 2019 and 2020. The group analyzed publicly available CDC data by comparing synthetic opioid deaths to other causes of death over the last few years, according to spokesperson Moira Muntz.

The CDC has not verified that fentanyl is the top killer among people in that age group, said Jeff Lancashire, a spokesperson for the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics.

The agency uses death certificates to determine the leading causes of death in the U.S. In its datasets, fentanyl deaths are included as part of a larger category of deaths attributed to synthetic opioids. Synthetic opioids, which include drugs like fentanyl and tramadol, are different from natural opioids, like morphine, and semi-synthetic opioids, such as oxycodone, according to [the CDC](#).

While fentanyl accounts for the majority of synthetic opioid deaths, the CDC lacks specific breakout data on deaths caused by fentanyl specifically, Lancashire said.

Drug overdose deaths are spread over four different cause of death categories, though the majority of them land in the “accidental” category, according to Lancashire. The rest are classified as suicides, homicides or undetermined.

According to preliminary 2021 data, accidents were the leading cause of death among 18-45 year-olds, with accidental synthetic opioid overdoses amounting to less than half of those deaths, Lancashire wrote.

“It doesn’t appear that fentanyl alone is the leading cause of death among 18-45 year olds and definitely is NOT the leading cause of death among all adults,” he wrote. “However, we don’t break down the leading causes in such a way that we can rank fentanyl anywhere.”

U.S. overdose deaths have risen most years for more than two decades, [the AP reported](#) in May. The increase began in the 1990s with overdoses involving opioid painkillers, followed by waves of deaths led by other opioids like heroin and — most recently — illicit fentanyl.

Last year, overdoses involving fentanyl and other synthetic opioids surpassed 71,000, up 23% from the year before. There also was a 23% increase in deaths involving cocaine and a 34% increase in deaths involving meth and other stimulants.

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