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Fentanyl's Grip: Solving Boston and Nation's Battle with the Deadly Opioid; We had Plan Columbia, We Need "Plan Fentanyl"

By Robert Weiner and Annie Cayer



Fentanyl Lollipop

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College Hub Boston is Case in Point of National Crisis

By Robert Weiner and Annie Cayer

The United States and Boston have been grappling with a prolonged epidemic of opioid addiction and abuse. At the forefront of this crisis now killing over 100,000 annually is fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that surpasses the potency of heroin by roughly fifty times.

Boston's proximity to major drug trafficking routes and its status as a regional healthcare hub make it vulnerable to the influx of opioids. Adding more concern, Boston stands as a densely populated metropolis where the city boasts one of the highest concentrations of college students in the nation.

John Fantegrossi, who works in the Addiction Medicine Division at Boston Children's Hospital told us, "In college, substance use is very rampant and only about 3% of college students seek treatments because abusing substances is so accepted." He added, "The concern is that the drug dealers aren't focused on quality control so there is cross contamination into drugs like cocaine and cannabis."

In 2021, 12% of cocaine samples tested in Boston were flagged positive for fentanyl, according to the Boston Public Health Commission. [Click Here](#).

Massachusetts leaders have explored various strategies in an attempt to address the crisis.

Attorney General Andrea Campbell has a comprehensive approach involving holding pharmaceutical companies accountable, ensuring equitable access to treatment, and collaborating with federal and local law enforcement.

The opioid crisis originated in the mid-1990s when Purdue Pharma introduced FDA-endorsed OxyContin, leading to a surge in fatalities from legally prescribed opioids. During this time, Barry McCaffrey, the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) from 1996 to 2001, implemented strategies to address drug trafficking and production in Colombia, particularly targeting the cocaine trade. Cocaine and crack use in the U.S. dropped by over half, with the assistance of "Plan Colombia." Another notable achievement was McCaffrey's anti-drug use youth media campaign, which, despite its \$3 billion public-private partnership as part of a \$30 billion federal drug-control budget, became the most prominent aspect of the effort against drugs for many Americans. The campaign's TV, print, and online ads reached approximately 90% of teenagers at least four times a week, and there was a 30% drop in youth drug use 1998 to 2001.

However, waves of deaths continued, with the expansion of the heroin market. Now, a new wave of fatalities -- over 100,000 a year- has occurred due to the widespread presence of fentanyl.

"Substance abuse has been going on for a long time and I don't think it will ever go away, however, education is very important and how society talks about substance use," said Fantegrossi.

What makes fentanyl especially frightening is the fact that it can and is infiltrating every corner of our country. From rural America to large metropolitan cities, like Boston, and as the DEA coined; "one pill can kill."

Opioid-related deaths in Massachusetts increased from the enormously high numbers by 2.5 percent in 2022 compared to 2021, according to data from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

"Fentanyl is a highly dangerous substance that even in small amounts can lead to a fatal overdose," said Dr. Bisola Ojikutu, Commissioner of Public Health and Executive Director of the Boston Public Health Commission.

Narcan (naloxone) is a vital opioid overdose reversal medication. Emergent BioSolutions recently lowered its price to under \$50. However, it remains costly, especially for Boston hospital patients, causing some families to forgo buying Narcan. "In my own clinical practice, there have been times when families have needed to pay \$30 for a copay for Narcan, and this has been too expensive for them," said Dr. Scott Hadland, an addiction specialist at Mass General for Children in Boston. Thankfully, the Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution program in Massachusetts offers naloxone at no cost to layperson first responders. Over 20 sites, including several in the Boston area, provide free naloxone through this program.

Federal authorities are actively seeking a solution to tackle this crisis. President Biden introduced his National Drug Control Strategy, focusing on improving treatment accessibility, harm reduction, and combating drug trafficking.

Senator Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), along with Representatives Annie Kuster (NH-02) and Lisa Blunt Rochester (DE-01), reintroduced the Stop Fentanyl Overdoses Act, aiming to strengthen the nation's public health response to the opioid epidemic. This was announced in a press release on May 8.

In Massachusetts, [data](#) shows there were 2,357 overdose deaths in 2022. That's 57 more deaths than in 2021-- a stable way-too-high amount.

Doctor Fantegrossi urges the community to "get more information on Narcan and train to administer the life-saving medication; the manufacturers of Narcan make a great video. The more Narcan that comes into the community can help save lives, the more people that know how to use it, the more lives we can all help save."

The nation -- and Massachusetts-- need a comprehensive Plan for Fentanyl.

Robert Weiner is the former Clinton and Bush White House Drug Policy Spokesman and former spokesman for the House Narcotics Committee. He also served as a senior staffer for the House Government Operations and Judiciary committees, Congressman John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper and Ed Koch, Sen. Ted Kennedy, and Gen. Barry McCaffrey. Annie Cayer is a policy and research analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change and an international affairs major with a minor in law and public policy at Northeastern University in Boston, Mass.