

BY

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# The Opioid Crisis and Staying Safe in the Line of Duty



ONE OF THE MOST PRESSING PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGES FACED BY THE UNITED STATES TODAY IS THE EPIDEMIC OF OPIOID OVERDOSES. ACCORDING TO THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (CDC), OVERDOSE OF OPIOIDS (INCLUDING PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS, HEROIN, AND FENTANYL) KILLED MORE THAN 42,000 PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2016, MORE THAN ANY OTHER YEAR ON RECORD. FROM 2015 TO 2016, THE DEATH RATE OF SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS OTHER THAN METHADONE, WHICH INCLUDES DRUGS SUCH AS TRAMADOL AND FENTANYL, INCREASED BY 100 PERCENT. ADDITIONALLY, FROM 2016 TO 2017, THERE WAS A 30 PERCENT INCREASE IN EMERGENCY ROOM VISITS FOR OPIOID OVERDOSES.

To understand how this epidemic came about, it is necessary to understand what opioids are. Opioids are natural or synthetic chemicals that interact with opioid receptors on nerve cells in the body and brain and reduce the intensity of pain signals and stimulate feelings of euphoria. This class of drugs includes the illegal drug heroin; synthetic opioids such as fentanyl; and pain medications available legally by prescription, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine, and many others. While prescription opioids can be an important part of pain management, all opioids are associated with serious risks and side effects, including misuse.

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*Law enforcement officers and other responders are increasingly likely to encounter illicit opioids in the course of their duties.*

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One of the factors that is believed to have contributed to the current opioid epidemic is an increase in the acceptance and use of prescription opioids for the treatment of chronic, non-cancer pain. As prescription rates went up, so did the misuse of both prescription and non-prescription opioids, indicating that the medications had the potential to be highly addictive.

The opioid overdose epidemic has worsened with a rise in the use of illicit opioids. The increased prevalence of illicitly manufactured fentanyl and other synthetic opioids has also become an emerging threat to law enforcement officers, firefighters, first responders, ambulance attendants, and others who may be exposed in the course of their work.

In partnership with the law enforcement and first responder communities, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has identified job categories that involve the potential for contact with illicit opioids and the potential resulting health effects. Specifically, these jobs include the following:

- Emergency medical services (EMS) providers, including first responders and employees of fire departments and private ambulance companies who attend to individuals with suspected fentanyl overdoses. Responders might encounter drugs or drug paraphernalia on or near the victim.
- Law enforcement officers who perform day-to-day law enforcement duties. Law enforcement officers

might come into contact with fentanyl during the course of their daily activities such as traffic stops, apprehending and searching subjects, and responding to fentanyl overdose calls.

- Law enforcement personnel who conduct investigations related to fentanyl, including executing search warrants and collecting, transporting, and storing evidence. Evidence collection activities in the field have the potential to aerosolize powders. In addition, law enforcement personnel who handle evidence in the chain of custody have the potential to be exposed to fentanyl unless controls are in place to prevent exposures.
- Workers who conduct special operations where exposure to large amounts of fentanyl are expected, such as hazardous material incident response teams responding to a release or spill and law enforcement officers executing search warrants on opioid processing or distribution sites or participating in other tactical operations.

Although law enforcement officers and other responders are increasingly likely to encounter illicit opioids in the course of their duties, NIOSH has developed recommendations on how these personnel can stay safe.

#### **SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### **WHEN ARRIVING ON THE SCENE**

When first arriving on a scene where illicit opioids might be present, law enforcement officers can take steps to

make sure they are protected. These steps include

- Wearing gloves, as well as long-sleeved clothing, when there may be illicit opioids present on the scene to avoid skin contact with the drugs.
- Using a properly fitted, NIOSH-approved respirator (mask) in case of airborne exposures—if small amounts of illicit opioids are visible, responders are recommended to use a disposable or elastomeric N, P, or R-100 filtering facepiece respirator or reusable elastomeric respirator with a HEPA cartridge.
- Wearing eye protection.
- Avoiding any actions that might cause powdered drugs to become airborne.

##### **IF EXPOSURE OCCURS**

If law enforcement officers are exposed to illicit opioids, they should take the following steps to prevent or reduce ill effects and to prevent further contamination:

- Notify others, including dispatch, about the exposure and take steps to prevent any further contamination.
- Do not touch eyes, mouth, nose, or other exposed skin.
- Wash hands and any contaminated skin with cool water and soap, if available.
- Do NOT use hand sanitizers as they may enhance absorption of the drugs into a person's skin.
- If the officer's clothing, shoes, and other personal protective equipment was contaminated, follow the department's guidelines for decontamination.

# POLICE CHIEF



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ROBERT FAIGIN

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