

US drug overdose deaths soar in 2016: report

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US drug overdose deaths surged 19 percent to at least 59,000 last year as deadly manufactured drugs like fentanyl intensified a national opioid addiction crisis, New York Times data showed Tuesday.

The data compiled by the Times showed that for the first time, drug overdoses are the leading cause of death for Americans under 50 years old.

The addition of fentanyl, which can be 50 times more powerful than heroin, to heroin and addictive prescription opiates like Oxycontin is one of the key factors in the surge in deaths.

The Times said its data showed between 59,000 and 65,000 people could have died from overdoses in 2016, up from 52,404 in 2015, and double the death rate a decade ago.

"And all evidence suggests the problem has continued to worsen in 2017," the Times said.

On Tuesday the US Drug Enforcement Administration issued a stark warning to officers

over handling fentanyl, which drug traffickers use as a cheap way to strengthen the effect of heroin and [prescription opioids](#).

It pointed to several cases in which police officers experienced extreme reactions after inadvertently touching or inhaling fentanyl-spiked drugs. The officers needed strong and sometime multiple injections of anti-overdose drugs like Narcan to prevent death.

"The spread of fentanyl means that any encounter a [law enforcement officer](#) has with an unidentified white powder could be fatal," said Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein at a DEA event.

"Just two milligrams—the equivalent of a few grains of table salt, an amount that can fit on the tip of your finger—can be lethal," Rosenstein said.

The DEA has also warned officers against letting drug-sniffing dogs too close to anything that might contain [fentanyl](#).

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