

# Notes From the Field: Testing for Nonprescribed Fentanyl and Percentage of Positive Test Results Among Patients with Opioid Use Disorder — United States, 2019–2020

## Background

- Routine monitoring for prescription and illicit drugs declined substantially in the United States at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, drug positivity rates rose, especially for opioid drugs, suggesting increased misuse.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Consistent with these trends, the CDC estimated that deaths involving synthetic opioids increased by 55% during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>
- One factor that may have contributed to increased misuse is the disruption of treatment services for substance use disorders and, therefore, medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD).<sup>4</sup>
- **Objective:** To better understand the scope of the ongoing opioid epidemic, the investigators of this study examined positivity rates and test volumes for nonprescribed fentanyl in the United States throughout 2019 and 2020.

## Methods

- Deidentified urine drug test (UDT) results of patient specimens tested at Quest Diagnostics throughout 2019 and 2020 were analyzed; the study population contained specimens from patients in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- Biweekly drug test volumes and positivity rates for non-prescribed fentanyl during 2019 and 2020 were determined.
  - MOUD patients were defined based on ICD-10-CM codes and a UDT result that was positive for buprenorphine or methadone that was indicated as prescribed.
- Data from MOUD patients were compared to those from non-MOUD patients.

## Results

- UDT results of 373,946 patient specimens were included in the analyses; 15.4% (n=57,749) were from MOUD patients.
- Positivity for nonprescribed fentanyl was 10% in early January 2019 and increased to 27% in late December 2019.
- Positivity for nonprescribed fentanyl
  - Among MOUD patients, positivity increased during the beginning of the pandemic, peaking at 41% during March 29 to April 11, 2020. Rates then declined and were lower in 2020 (12%-19%) than in 2019 (19%-27%) for the September-December period.
  - Among non-MOUD patients, positivity for nonprescribed fentanyl (around 1%-2%) did not significantly increase during the beginning of the pandemic. However, a small but significant increase occurred during July through December 2020 (1.4%-1.8%) than in the same months in 2019 (1.1%-1.7%).
- Test volumes for nonprescribed fentanyl
  - Test volumes decreased to a low point of 65% below 2019 levels among MOUD patients and 72% below 2019 levels for non-MOUD patients early in the pandemic.
  - Test volumes remained 43% lower from September to December 2020 than in the same months in 2019. In the same months, volume was only 13% lower among non-MOUD patients.

## Conclusions

- The findings of this study indicate that MOUD patients were disproportionately affected during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Resuming and intensifying access to MOUD, as well as other treatment and harm reduction services (eg, drug monitoring when indicated), is an urgent need.

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### Authors

Justin K Niles,<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Gudín,<sup>1,2</sup> Alana M Vivolo-Kantor,<sup>3</sup> R Matthew Gladden,<sup>3</sup> Desiree Mustaquim,<sup>3</sup> Puja Seth,<sup>3</sup> Harvey W Kaufman<sup>1</sup>

### Affiliations

<sup>1</sup>Quest Diagnostics, Secaucus, NJ USA  
<sup>2</sup>University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine, Miami, FL USA  
<sup>3</sup>National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA USA

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### Webpage

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7047a4.htm>

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