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## Fatal overdoses already outpace 2016, again driven by fentanyl

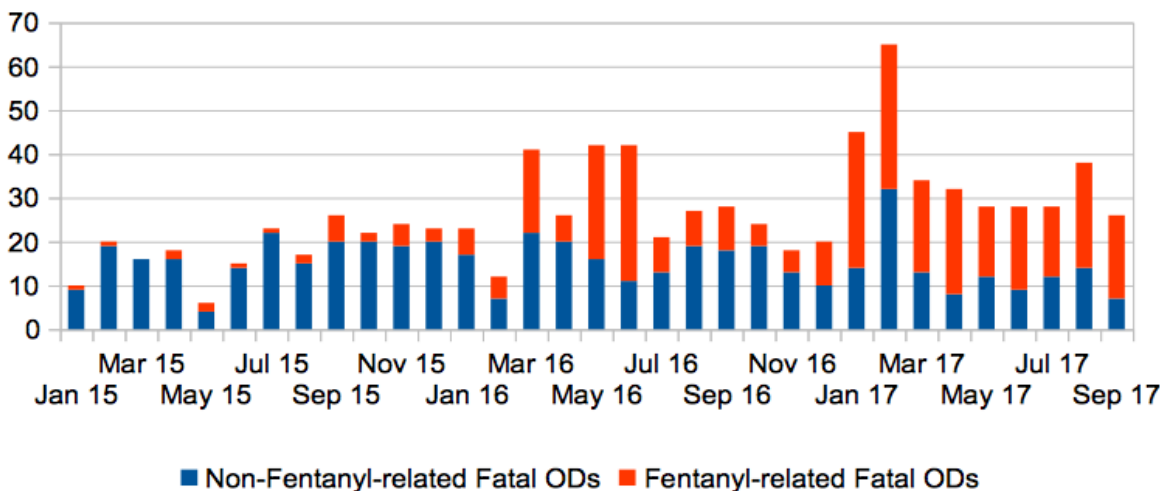
By **JOE SONKA** | December 11, 2017 5:30 pm

The number of fatal accidental drug overdoses in Louisville during the first three-quarters of this year equaled the record-breaking total through the entire year of 2016, according to records provided to Insider Louisville from the Jefferson County Coroner’s office.

These records show that 324 people died in Jefferson County due to an accidental drug overdose from the beginning of 2017 through the end of September, with an incredibly high 62.7 percent of such victims having the powerful opioid fentanyl detected in their system through autopsy and toxicology tests.

### Fatal accidental drug overdoses in Louisville, by month

(January 2015 to September 2017)



Statistics provided by the Jefferson County Coroner’s office

These alarming statistics show that while the number of Louisville EMS calls responding to opioid overdoses has begun a **significant decline** since a peak in the city’s opioid epidemic this February, the number of fatal overdoses involving derivatives of fentanyl — which can be up to 100 times more potent an opioid than heroin — continues at a record pace.

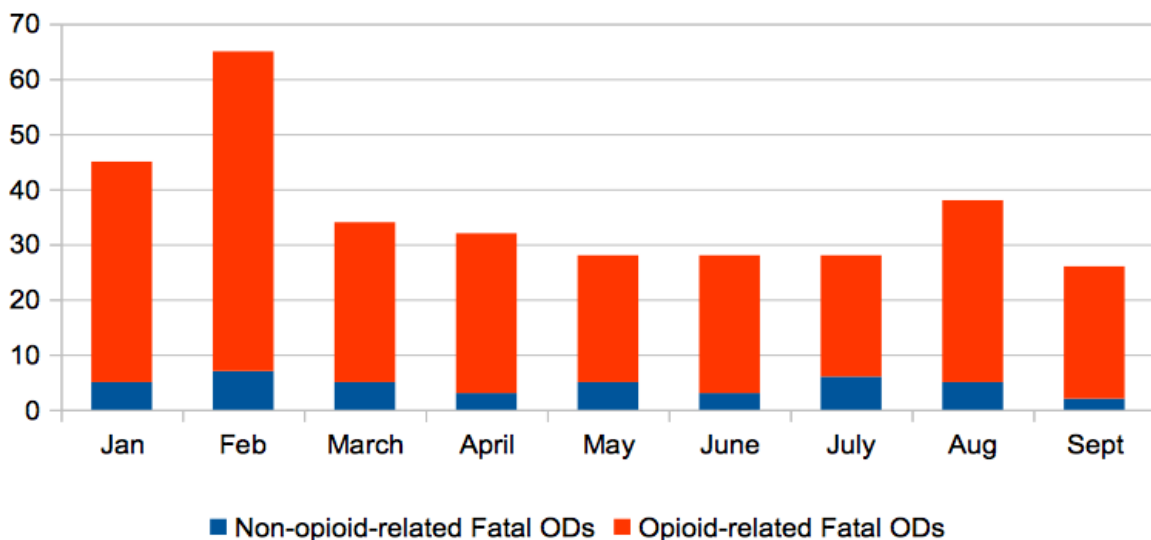
According to the coroner’s office, overdose deaths related to fentanyl were extremely rare until late 2015, as only 26 of their 220 cases of accidental overdoses that year — 11.8 percent — involved the drug.

The office’s fatal accidental overdose cases would leap to a **record-high 324 in 2016**, with 139 cases — 42.9 percent — showing the presence of fentanyl. But through the first nine months of 2017, the 203 fatal overdoses cases involving fentanyl outnumber both of those years combined, contributing to nearly two out of every three fatal overdoses in Louisville.

The opioid epidemic of Louisville, Kentucky, the Ohio Valley region and much of the nation is widely regarded to have started with the influx of prescription painkillers, which proved to be extremely addictive.

When state governments cracked down on unethical “pill mills” to combat this problem, those addicted to opioids began shifting to the relatively cheaper and more available heroin, with increasingly deadly consequences. Once fentanyl and derivatives of that opioid emerged within the illicit drug market in 2016 — often mixed in with heroin supplies — fatal overdoses once again spiked further.

**Fatal accidental drug overdoses in Louisville (2017)**



Statistics provided by the Jefferson County Coroner’s office

As fentanyl has quickly gone from being a rarity to the No. 1 cause of fatal overdoses in Louisville, this year it has been rare that any fatal overdose does not involve some kind of opioid, including heroin and prescription painkillers. According to the coroner’s records,

87.3 percent of fatal accidental overdoses through the first three-quarters of 2017 have involved at least one type of opioid.

Though the monthly rate of fatal overdoses has remained high this year, the totals have at least remained far below the city's peak month this February. The Jefferson County Coroner's office had 65 fatal accidental overdose cases that month, 20 more than the previous high that was set a month earlier.

Fatal overdoses in February were often clustered in short periods of time, as there were two different days that witnessed seven different people die of an accidental drug overdose, with fentanyl involved in four of those on each day. In the seven-day periods of Feb. 7-13 and Feb. 22-28, there were 22 fatal overdoses.

While the months following this February have averaged roughly 30 fatal overdose cases, this still exceeds the typical rate from 2016, in which the total exceeded 30 in only three months that year.

Last week, Dr. Sarah Moyer, the director of the Louisville Metro Department of Public Health and Wellness, told IL that she was encouraged to see overdose runs in the city fall to a **21-month low** in November, but added that "we still are seeing too many overdose deaths, and reducing that number remains a focus for us."