

the heroin crisis

Fentanyl-laced pills circulate within bay area high schools, student lives at risk

Flower bouquets, candles and objects that represented senior Lauren Briery covered the folding tables on Los Altos High School's quad on April 4. A poster with handwritten messages dedicated to Briery stood adjacent.

Briery died on the morning of April 1 following what is being investigated by Mountain View Police as a possible fentanyl overdose. She was 18 years old.

Pinewood School senior Rachel Farhoudi, who played soccer with Briery on the Mountain View Los Altos club soccer team, said Briery was a role model to her younger teammates.

"She didn't have a mean bone in her body," Farhoudi said. "She was just the nicest to everyone and got along with everybody."

Farhoudi said Briery's death was a huge wake up call for the Los Altos High School community.

"Lauren was the last person I would expect this to happen to," Farhoudi said. "I mean, you never expect it to happen to anyone, but it was definitely a shock." Fentanyl-related deaths are rapidly

increasing in Santa Clara County: the synthetic opioid 50 times more potent than heroin killed 27 people in 2019, 86 in 2020 and 132 in 2021, according to the Santa Clara Medical Examiner-Coroner's office.

Fentanyl overdose has become the leading cause of death among Americans aged 18 to 45, surpassing suicide and COVID-19.

David Fisher, the Crimes Against Persons sergeant in the detective bureau for the Mountain View police department, oversees the detective unit which handles any crime that has a human victim.

Fisher's unit is currently involved in the open investigation into Briery's death and waiting on the toxicology report. While he is unable to comment on the case, he said he has seen a general increase in fentanyl poisoning from people who unknowingly consume fentanyl-laced drugs.

"For teenagers specifically, I hope that this is a little bit of a sobering event because it's very scary," Fisher said. "There's a potential that just buying a pill of Adderall could have fentanyl in it, and that could be the last thing you do."



Los Altos High School students pay their respects to the late senior Lauren Briery, who died on April 1 from a potential fentanyl overdose, with flower bouquets and various other gifts. Rachel Farhoudi, who played soccer with Briery, said that her team discussed planting a tree on their home field in her honor. "Losing Lauren unexpectedly has been so hard," Farhoudi said. "A lot of the girls (on the team) really looked up to her."

Surge in opioid prescriptions leads to fentanyl crisis

Stanford Professor of Addiction Medicine Anna Lembke said the drastic increase in fentanyl overdoses began with a rise in opioid prescriptions.

"In the 90s, doctors began prescribing more opioids to patients for minor and chronic pain conditions," Lembke said. "Prescription quadrupled in the United States between 1997 and 2012, and as opioid prescribing went up, so did the number of people getting addicted and dying."

Lembke said the increase in prescription opioids naturally resulted in non-prescribed users having easier access to the addictive drugs. Fentanyl in particular is much cheaper to produce.

"For thousands of years, people have used opioids derived from the poppy plant or opium," Lembke said. "In the last hundred years, scientists have figured out how to synthesize fentanyl and other opioids in a laboratory without needing the plant. You don't need to cultivate it, you don't need to harvest it, you don't need to ship it, you just need the precursor chemicals. So fentanyl is really cheap to make."

Lembke said by 2012, doctors began to recognize harm of opioids, and prescriptions decreased, but it was too late for many. "People who had become addicted at that point then turned to cheaper and more abundant sources like illicit opioids like heroin and fentanyl," Lembke said. "And fentanyl is much

stronger: it's 50 to 100 times more potent than other opioids like heroin or morphine."

In addition, Lembke said illicit drug producers started placing fentanyl in other less potent substances without the user's knowledge.

"When fentanyl first entered the market, it was often in the heroin supply without people realizing it," Lembke said. "And so that's partly why there was a spike in deaths — people thought they were taking an amount of heroin that they could tolerate."

According to Lembke, fentanyl lacing continues today. "Counterfeit prescription pills like Xanax and Oxytocin are being made with fentanyl in them,"

Lembke said. "And so people were taking them thinking they were just taking an Oxy or a Norco or a Z-Bar and dying because there was fentanyl in there."

Lembke said when illegal drug manufacturers realized fentanyl's profitability, they started to put fentanyl in other opioids, such as heroin, effectively cutting costs while giving their customers a more intense and addictive experience. In addition, fentanyl's potency can cause customers to return, seeking out the same addictive effect.

"If you have some heroin, and you want to make it a little bit stronger so that your customers get an effect and come back to you,

then you would put a little bit of fentanyl in there," Lembke said. "But it's then hard to gauge how much somebody can tolerate."

Santa Clara County District Jeff Rosen said there has definitely been an increase in fentanyl in Santa Clara County and in the state.

"Several years ago fentanyl was more prevalent in the East Coast and the Midwest of this country," Rosen said. "And then a few years ago, it made its way to California. Initially, fentanyl was coming here from Mexico and now it's coming from China. It's very inexpensive for drug dealers to get it and it's highly dangerous."

Today, the practice of lacing other drugs with fentanyl is so widespread that nearly any drug purchased illegally is at risk of being contaminated with fentanyl — even some forms of marijuana. Just two to three milligrams of fentanyl can be fatal to someone with no preexisting opioid addiction.

But there is hope. Lembke said the distribution of Naloxone, an opioid overdose reversal agent marketed under the brand name Narcan, has lowered opioid overdose deaths.

"Naloxone has been made widely available in the city of San Francisco since approximately 2008," Lembke said. "And we think as a result, the heroin-related overdose deaths in San Francisco remain lower than in other regions."

Regardless, she said students should be extremely cautious when taking any drug. "Don't ever take a pill that wasn't prescribed to you by your doctor and obtained from a pharmacy," Lembke said.

"Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than other opioids like heroin or morphine."
Anna Lembke

1960 Fentanyl first synthesized
1970s Heroin usage increases dramatically with the Vietnam War
Late 1990s Doctors prescribe more opioids to patients for minor to chronic pain conditions
2012 Opioid prescriptions decrease as medical professionals realize their harmful effects
2020 90 people die of fentanyl overdose in Santa Clara County
2021 132 people die of fentanyl overdose in Santa Clara County
April 25, 2022 Santa Clara County Fentanyl Task Force holds their first meeting
May 10, 2022 First ever National Fentanyl Awareness Day

FACTS ABOUT FENTANYL

One American died from a drug overdose every 5 minutes in 2021 (CDC).

42% of drugs tested for fentanyl contained a lethal dose of fentanyl (U.S. DEA).

One kilogram of fentanyl has the potential to kill 500,000 people (U.S. DEA).

Synthetic opioid deaths, largely due to fentanyl, rose 55.6% between Jan 31, 2020 and Jan 31, 2021 (U.S. DEA).

RESOURCES

If you or someone you know is struggling with substance abuse, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Hotline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

www.findtreatment.gov

Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800-273-8255

HOW TO TELL IF A DRUG IS LACED WITH FENTANYL

Don't trust any substance not prescribed by a licensed medical professional at a trusted pharmacy. You can test drugs purchased illicitly with Fentanyl Test Strips to detect the presence of the opioid (U.S. DEA).

TREATING AN OVERDOSE

If you see someone experiencing the following symptoms — inability to speak, small pupil size, cold and blue discolored skin, slow or shallow breathing, vomiting or a faint heartbeat — they're most likely overdosing on opioids. Administer Naloxone, either the nasal spray or the injectable, to the person overdosing as soon as you see the signs, and you can potentially save their life (U.S. DEA).

Local task force fights fentanyl epidemic

The 132 people killed by fentanyl poisoning last year in Santa Clara County defy stereotypes held about drug users: they include both poor people and rich people, people of all ethnicities, genders and ages.

Fentanyl is being laced into an increasing amount of drugs bought from illicit sources, creating a lethal high for people who may not be aware of fentanyl in the drugs they take.

Santa Clara County District Attorney Jeff Rosen said opioid abuse, which includes the use of fentanyl, is the leading cause of drug-related deaths in Santa Clara County and the leading cause of death for people under the age of 25 in the county.

In response to the rising number of fentanyl-related deaths in the county, The Santa Clara County Fentanyl Task Force held its first meeting on Zoom in April. The task force is made up of individuals from law enforcement, crime units, behavioral health, medicine, local government and schools; people who study addiction, have been addicted to drugs, and were friends and family of those who died from fentanyl poisoning.

Among many topics, the group discussed fentanyl's circulation, detection and origins, and the distribution of overdose prevention tools.

On the criminal justice side of overdose prevention, law enforcement is on alert. Rosen said two people are currently being tried for murder for selling fentanyl laced substances and several have been prosecuted for the felony of violating Santa Clara County's health and safety code through selling the equivalent of poison.

"(We) recently arrested a man who had 11,000 fentanyl pills in his car," Rosen said at the meeting. "So let's put that into perspective. The 12-year-old girl who died went into cardiac arrest within minutes after ingesting just part of one pill. Traditional law enforcement approaches can still work, but we also must evolve. Drugs are a health problem. Addiction is a sickness. We will not arrest and prosecute our way out of this crisis."

On the public health approach to overdose prevention, the task force is looking into establishing a fentanyl advisory which informs people of personal and legal consequences of using fentanyl.

Task force member and San Jose State University professor Erin Woodhead said another strategy the task force is using includes raising awareness among younger potential users.

"The communications committee is going to try to address how we can effectively reach teens with information in a way that they're going to listen and not feel we're just lecturing them," Woodhead said. "We're also trying to incorporate some younger people into this working group to really understand their mindset."

Woodhead said that information has to be presented in a specific way to be successful in deterring teens away from drugs.

"You need to give both sides of the information," Woodhead said. "You're giving both the consequences of use and you're acknowledging why it may feel good for a teen to use that drug. That's part of (teen) development — understanding new experiences and expanding their view of the world."

Another strategy the task force is using includes overdose reversal kits and testing strips. Mountain View Police Department sergeant David Fisher said all police officers carry a Narcan kit with them so that they can quickly reverse an overdose. Fisher said the MVPD used to have drug testing kits, but like many other police departments, they generally do not use them anymore because potential exposure to fentanyl can be deadly. Samples of substances police collect are instead sent to labs to be tested.

But while police generally do not test substances, fentanyl test strips are cost-efficient and effective, and Woodhead said

the task force is currently acquiring them to spread throughout local communities.

"These strips would allow people to determine if the drug that they're about to take has any amount of fentanyl in it," Woodhead said. "They're relatively inexpensive. It is an action we can take pretty quickly that isn't going to cost a lot of money."

Despite these efforts that have decreased the rates of overdose, Fisher said he thinks the problem will continue.

He said producing and selling fentanyl-laced substances generate profit, so it is especially important to stem demand as well as supply by making sure people are aware of the dangers of

fentanyl being laced into any substance not bought directly from a pharmacy. Rosen agreed.

"It's not like when you go to the pharmacy and you know if you're buying Advil, you're getting Advil, or Tylenol, you're getting Tylenol," Rosen said. "When a drug dealer gives you a pill and tells you it's Xanax or Sudafed, or Vicodin or Percocet, it might be. It might also have fentanyl in it which could kill you. So if you need medication because you're in pain, talk to your doctor and get a prescription from your doctor, but don't try to self-medicate by buying from somebody where you have no idea what they're selling."

73%
of opioid overdoses in 2020 involved fentanyl

Source: San Francisco Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

Students grapple with risks of substance use

In December 1997, a then-Paly senior was anonymously quoted in The Campanile, saying, "Getting drugs at Paly is easier than water-ballooning a freshman."

A survey of 362 Paly students from the week of Dec. 1, 1997 found that 42.3% of polled students admitted to having used an illegal drug at least once. Back then, alcohol was the illegal drug of choice, followed by tobacco and marijuana. Today, according to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 10.37% of Californian 12 to 17-year-olds reported using drugs in the past month, with alcohol and marijuana being the most commonly used drugs among teens nationwide. Paly is no exception to these statistics.

A Paly senior who agreed to be interviewed only if her name was not used said the majority of people she knows have either done drugs or regularly use them. In fact, she said the competitive environment of the school may contribute to this drug use.

"We live in this area with so much wealth. ... either the kid feels so much pressure from their parents that they choose to find something like cocaine to study and to work harder, or they'll do something to cope," she said.

"They might try something like opiates and see if that'll have any effect on how they feel."

Paly 2021 alumni and Colorado University at Boulder freshman Benny McShea said fentanyl is a large problem among the Boulder student body, specifically when put into cocaine without the knowledge of the user.

"I remember first hearing from social media posts, and parents groups on Facebook how people should tell their kids to stay away from cocaine, especially since it could be laced (with fentanyl)," McShea said. "And in the first week, three freshmen died."

In response to the current fentanyl crisis, the CDC recommends the use of fentanyl testing strips for drugs, since it is nearly impossible to tell if drugs have been laced with fentanyl without them.

McShea said other colleges allow students to request drug tests to make sure their substances are not laced.

"It's completely free, completely anonymous," McShea said. "Receive a little package and you get to test whatever,

marijuana, psychedelic, whatever you're doing. You get to test it and see if it's safe or if it's not."

The anonymous Paly senior said people should be cautious when dealing with illicit drugs that are at risk of being laced with opioids like fentanyl.

"If you're going to do something stupid, do it in the smartest way possible, because everyone does stupid s—," she said. "But it's about harm reduction. It's about minimizing risk. It's about having fun but not dying (while) doing it."

Text and Design by Gina Bae, Gianna Brogley, Valerie Chu & Braden Leung

Potentially lethal doses of heroin and fentanyl compared to a penny

Source: U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Fentanyl and heroin doses are represented by granulated sugar for safety purposes. Image enlarged, not actual size.

