

**Prepared Statement by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa)
Co-Chairman, Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
Hearing on Federal Government Response to the Overdose Epidemic
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93,000. That's how many people died from drug overdoses last year. This is the sharpest annual increase in 30 years. The New York Times wrote that 2020's overdose death numbers eclipsed the peak yearly deaths from car crashes, gun violence and the AIDS epidemic. This is astonishing.

No region was spared last year. Every corner of the United States suffered an increased death toll. The main culprits? COVID-19 and deadly fentanyl analogues.

So today's hearing is timely because it's urgent that we evaluate our federal approach to this drug crisis. COVID-19 played a significant role in the increased drug overdose rates. The pandemic brought about social isolation, trauma, and job losses, and made necessary tools – like access to treatment – more difficult.

Data shows us that overdoses took off in March 2020, when pandemic-driven shutdowns and physical-distancing measures began. We must learn how to navigate drug policy in a post-COVID world. What lessons did we learn? How can we improve? These are questions I want answers to.

Also, fentanyl analogues are driving up the death toll. According to Customs and Border Patrol, the amount of fentanyl and its analogues seized so far this fiscal year nearly doubles what was seized in all of 2020. This statistic alone should be enough to compel serious long-term action on controlling deadly fentanyl related substances.

Drug dealers often mix fentanyl with other drugs like meth, cocaine, and marijuana. Traffickers prey on those suffering with addiction by adding deadly analogues to other drugs. Sometimes users know that they're consuming a fentanyl substance, but sometimes they don't. In any event, the data speaks for itself: polydrug abuse – mainly due to fentanyl substances – is a driver of overdose deaths.

So at a time of record drug abuse and death, where should our priorities be?

I recently outlined in a letter to the Office of National Drug Control Policy what I think must be prioritized in a federal approach to drug policy. Among other things, I highlighted the need to build a plan to deal with historic levels of methamphetamine supply and use, that we need to address polysubstance trafficking, and we must proactively address fentanyl analogues.

The authority to schedule fentanyl substances expires in October. The Administration must support efforts to proactively and permanently schedule fentanyl analogues. To do anything less will surely enable the spread and scourge of these deadly drugs.

I'm grateful that Acting Director LaBelle invited me to weigh in on the National Drug Control Strategy and am pleased to have her testify today. We must work together in a whole-of-government approach to assess gaps in policy so we can tackle this crisis.

Simply put, it's a matter of life and death. 93,000 Americans lost their lives last year because of the rampant scourge of drugs in our country. This must end.

Thank you again to today's witnesses for being here. I look forward to hearing about how we can work together to strengthen our approach and combat the drug overdose epidemic.