

SPOTLIGHT

VENTURA COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE
SUMMER 2026

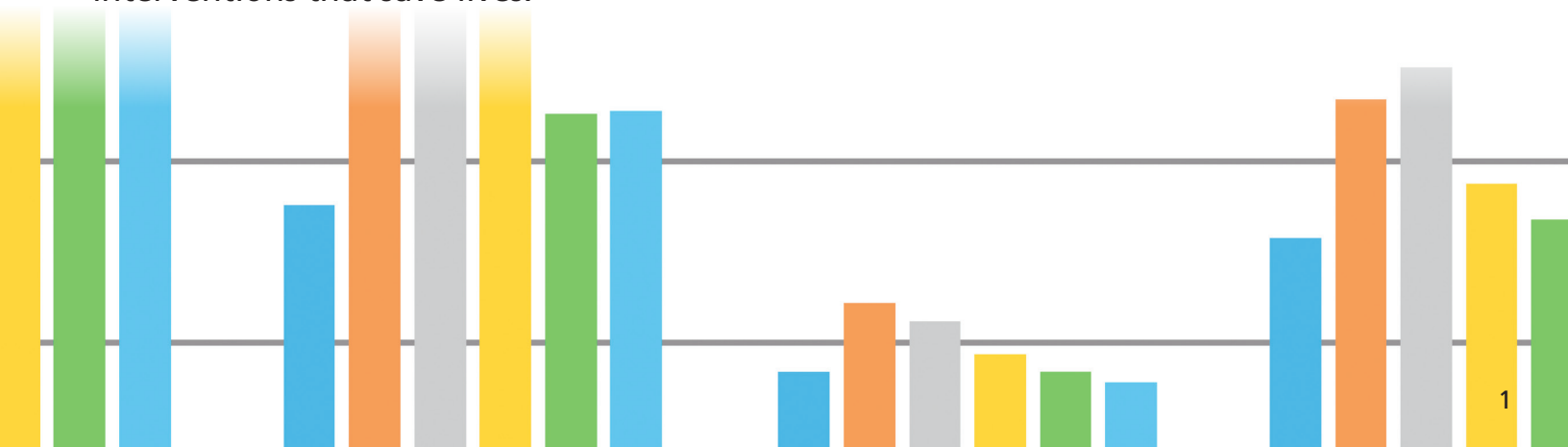
Utilizing Death Data to Save Lives

Under the leadership of Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Christopher Young, the Ventura County Medical Examiner's Office (MEO) plays a critical role in identifying overdose trends, emerging substances, and populations at increased risk of harm. Through its partnership with COAST (Coalition for Overdose Awareness and Solutions Team), the MEO provides data that helps inform prevention strategies, public health planning, treatment programs, and community response efforts.

Ventura County has become recognized for its collaborative approach to overdose surveillance and prevention. By sharing data across agencies and disciplines, local partners are able to identify emerging threats and develop targeted interventions that save lives.

"Medical examiner data is actionable. It helps us identify who is at risk, what substances are causing harm, and where prevention efforts can make the greatest impact."

Christopher Young, MD
Ventura County Chief Medical Examiner



The Role of the Medical Examiner's Office

While the investigations and reports of this independent County department are used by law enforcement and others in the criminal justice system, the Medical Examiner's Office also plays a critical public health role.

The MEO investigates sudden and unexpected deaths to determine cause and manner of death, conducts toxicology testing when appropriate, and tracks trends that can help communities respond to emerging health risks. Information gathered through

these investigations helps identify changing patterns in substance use, monitor overdose trends, and provide early warning about new and dangerous substances as well as other emerging health threats appearing in the community.

This information supports decision-making across multiple sectors, including public health, behavioral health, healthcare, treatment providers, and public safety agencies.

Keeping an Eye on Kratom and 7-OH

More recently, Medical Examiner's Office data has also helped draw attention to the growing presence of kratom-related compounds in overdose deaths.

While kratom products are often marketed as herbal supplements, many contain highly concentrated levels of mitragynine and 7-OH (7-hydroxymitragynine). 7-OH can be up to 14 times more potent than morphine, with significant risks for addiction and overdose. Because these products are not regulated in the same way as prescription medications, concentrations can vary significantly between products and even batches, and consumers may not fully understand what they are taking.

As Ventura County began identifying these compounds in local overdose investigations, MEO data helped elevate awareness among public health leaders, healthcare providers, and prevention partners.

ADVANCES IN TESTING

The overdose landscape continues to evolve as new synthetic opioids and novel compounds enter the illicit drug supply.

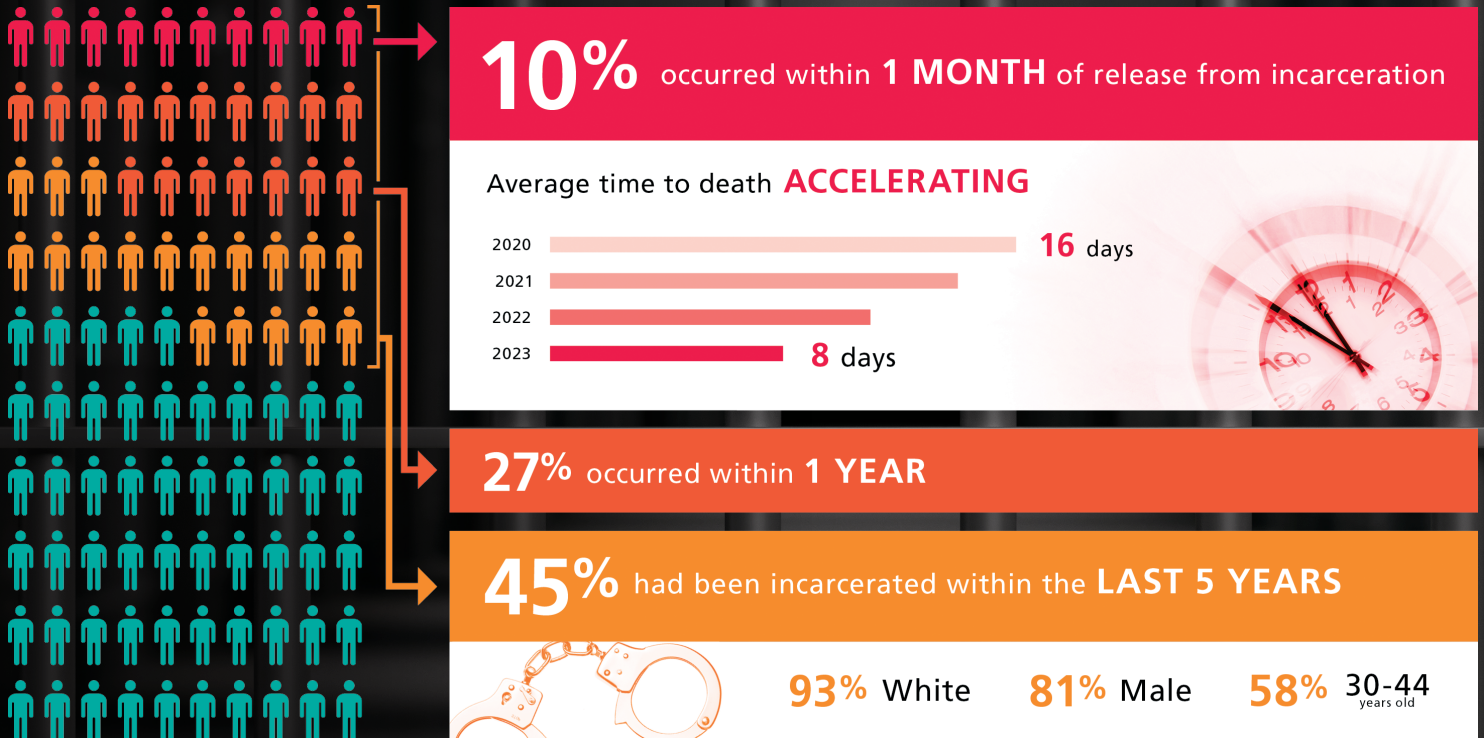
To stay ahead of these changes, Ventura County utilizes advanced toxicology testing capable of detecting a wide range of emerging substances. This enhanced surveillance helps investigators identify drugs that may not yet be included in routine testing panels and provides valuable intelligence on new illicit drug trends developing locally and nationally. A recent Ventura County MEO autopsy identified a novel opioid which had never before been associated with an overdose death in the United States.

Early detection allows county partners to respond more effectively and adapt prevention efforts to better protect residents from emerging overdose threats.



Kratom and 7-OH are sold in a variety of formats, with capsules, tablets, and shots most prevalent in Ventura County.

ACCIDENTAL DRUG OVERDOSE DEATHS IN VENTURA COUNTY 2020 TO 2023



Incarceration and Overdose Deaths

A collaborative analysis conducted by the Ventura County Medical Examiner’s Office, Sheriff’s Office, and COAST revealed an important overdose risk factor.

By comparing overdose death records with incarceration data, it was found that approximately 10% of individuals who died from an overdose had been released from jail within the previous month. Nearly half had been incarcerated within the previous five years.

The findings highlighted the elevated overdose risk that can occur after a period of reduced opioid use, when tolerance may decrease and a previously tolerated dose can become dangerous or fatal.

As a result, Ventura County expanded access to medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder within the jail system, helping individuals begin or continue treatment while incarcerated and reduce their risk of overdose after release.

The project has shown how cross-agency data sharing can identify previously unseen trends and lead directly to life-saving interventions.

Trends to Watch: New and Novel Opioids

Fentanyl continues to be a leading driver of overdose deaths, but it is no longer the only concern.

Medical Examiner surveillance has identified the emergence of additional synthetic opioids and novel substances that may be more potent, more difficult to detect, or not yet widely recognized by the public. Carfentanil, nitazenes, and orphines are among the novel substances that have recently contributed to deaths in Ventura County.

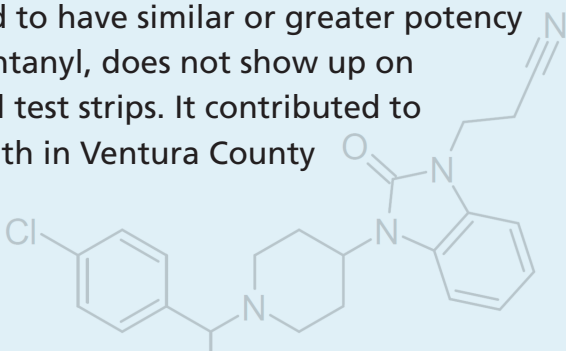
These compounds present ongoing challenges for healthcare providers, first responders, toxicology laboratories, and prevention programs.

By combining advanced testing with strong cross-sector collaboration, Ventura County is building a proactive system that can identify new threats early and translate data into action.

Novel Substances Identified in Ventura County

Dihydro-7-hydroxy mitragynine is a semi-synthetic derivative of 7-OH with higher potency, sold as MGM-15 in the U.S. since 2025. It has contributed to one death in Ventura County.

Orphines are a new class of potent synthetic opioids of growing concern across the country. **Cychlorphine**, an orphine believed to have similar or greater potency than fentanyl, does not show up on fentanyl test strips. It contributed to one death in Ventura County in 2025.



COAST SPOTLIGHT on Dr. Christopher Young: View the Video

To hear more about the Medical Examiner's Office and its vital contribution to the collaborative efforts of COAST, see the interview with Dr. Young.



coast.venturacounty.gov/news-updates

Looking Ahead

Dr. Young believes the same data-driven approach used to address overdose deaths can help inform prevention efforts across many other areas of public health.

As Ventura County strengthens and expands partnerships between public health, behavioral health, healthcare, law enforcement, and community organizations, quality mortality data will continue to be a critical tool for understanding risk, identifying trends, and improving life-saving outcomes for residents throughout the county.

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COAST Ventura County

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