



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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A 10-year-old Miami boy may be latest — and among youngest — victim of opioid crisis

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A 10-year-old Miami boy may be among the youngest victims of Florida's opioid crisis.

Preliminary toxicology tests show that Alton Banks had the potent painkiller fentanyl in his system when he collapsed at his Overtown home in June, authorities said on Monday.

The death comes against the backdrop of a staggering opioid crisis that has wreaked havoc across the country, with hundreds of South Florida drug users fatally overdosing in recent years. But illegal fentanyl and some of its synthetic cousins can be so powerful that just a speck, breathed in or absorbed through the skin, can fatally affect an unwitting victim.

Investigators believe Alton, a fifth-grader at Frederick Douglass Elementary, may be just such a victim.

On June 23, the boy began vomiting after returning home from an outing at a neighborhood pool. That evening, he was found unconscious. Paramedics rushed to his home on the 100 block of Northwest 13th Street that evening. Doctors pronounced him dead at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Miami detectives are still trying to piece together his final day.

There's no evidence to suggest that Alton came into contact with drugs at his home, authorities said. But Overtown, the hub of heroin and fentanyl sales, has been ground zero for Miami's opioid epidemic, and Alton could have unknowingly come into contact with the drug on the street.

"He was out playing, like we want all our children to do. It's unclear whether it was at the pool or on the walk home," said Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle. "We're anxiously hoping that someone comes forward to help us solve this horrific death."

The Miami-Dade Medical Examiner's Office is still doing more testing, and a final report is pending. Authorities don't generally disclose preliminary findings, but the Miami-Dade state attorney's office agreed to comment publicly because of the unusual nature of the death and the need for tips in finding out how the boy might have come into contact with the drugs.

Alton's mother, Shantell Banks, was informed of the preliminary findings late last week. She was too distraught to speak in depth on Monday but said her son was a "fun kid" who wanted to become an engineer and loved the Carolina Panthers.

"Cam Newtown was his favorite football player," Shantell Banks told the Miami Herald.

The effects of fentanyl and its variants have been widely chronicled, devastating communities across the nation and in Florida, where a crackdown on prescription painkillers such as Oxycodone is believed to have led to the spike in heroin and opioid abuse.



A small but powerful dose of carfentanil seized by Miami-Dade police in South Miami-Dade in December.

C.M. Guerrero - Miami Herald

The drug is powerful enough that police departments have warned officers about even touching the drug. Last fall, three Broward police dogs got sick after sniffing the drug during a federal raid.

The scourge of opioid deaths led the Florida Legislature to pass a law imposing stiff minimum mandatory sentences on dealers caught with four grams or more of fentanyl or its analogs. The new law also made it possible to charge dealers with murder if they provide a fatal dose of fentanyl or drugs mixed with fentanyl.

Even if investigators were able to figure out where the drugs that possibly killed Alton came from, putting together a murder case might prove difficult. The new law doesn't go into affect until Oct. 1.

While fentanyl is a legal painkiller generally prescribed in patch form, the version of the drug wreaking havoc on the streets is believed to be shipped illegally from clandestine labs in China. The new trade of drug dealing was chronicled in the 2015 Miami Herald's Pipeline China series. A federal commission in January blasted China's role in the opioid epidemic, while Miami-Dade county leaders recently wrapped up task-force meetings aimed at exploring the epidemic.

The dramatic spike in deaths — more people died of opioid abuse in Miami-Dade last year than there were homicides — has led to increased police probes of dealers, particularly in Overtown. Last month, Miami-Dade police arrested a man in what was billed as the largest fentanyl bust in county history.

According to the Miami-Dade medical examiner's office, there were nearly 300 overdose deaths involving variants of fentanyl last year.

Across Florida, in the first half of 2016, fentanyl and its analogs killed 853 people while contributing to 135 more deaths, state records show. Of those, only nine were under the age of 18.

Young victims — some curious toddlers who ingest the drugs by mistake — account for only a small amount of opioid victims. In 2015, there were 51 victims under the age of five, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, a number that is still an increase from over a decade ago.



Captain Tony Milan-EMS Battalion Commander for City of Miami Fire Rescue, upper right, works on an overdose victim with his crew late last year, another in a heroin/fentanyl overdose crisis centered around Overtown.

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Anyone with information on the death of Alton Banks can call Miami-Dade CrimeStoppers at 305-471-TIPS.



Why it's so hard to break an opioid addiction

More than half million people have died between 2000 and 2015 from opioids. Today, opioid deaths are considered an epidemic. To understand the struggle individuals undergo once addicted to these drugs, we take a closer look at what happens to your body on

Meta Viers & Patrick Gleason/McClatchy

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