

Report points to growing epidemic of drug abuse in Pennsylvania

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A recent report adds more evidence of the opioid epidemic in Pennsylvania. Overdoses of pain medication have increased 225 percent from 2000 to 2014 while hospitalizations for heroin overdoses have increased by 162 percent during the same period.

The report, *Hospitalizations for Overdose of Pain Medication and Heroin*, was published by the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council (PHC4). It culled data from hospitals whose patients were admitted for the principal reason of overdosing from either pain medication such as OxyContin and Oxycodone or heroin, during the years 2000 to 2014, and focusing on Pennsylvania residents age 15 and older.

The report, as noted by the authors, excludes overdoses that did not result in hospital admission, but were limited to a visit to the emergency room, or were entirely outside the hospital. Adding such overdoses would have reinforced some of the points the authors have made.

In the case of the hospitalizations for pain medication abuse, these peaked in 2011 at 1,142, with a decrease to 929 in 2014. The opposite is the case for heroin hospitalizations: the largest increases happened between 2010 and 2014, evidencing the fact that more and more people are turning to cheaper and more potent forms of opioids.

Among those admitted to the hospital for overdosing on pain medication, the largest group, 28 percent, were aged 50-59, while 40 percent of those who were admitted for heroin overdose were aged 20-29.

The report distinguishes between urban counties—Allegheny, Beaver, Berks, Bucks, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Delaware, Erie, Lackawanna, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lehigh, Luzerne, Montgomery, Northampton, Philadelphia, Westmoreland, and

York—and rural ones. Rising hospitalizations for pain medication and heroin overdoses were found in both urban and rural counties, but rural counties had a much higher increase in both: pain medication overdoses increased 285 percent, heroin overdoses by 315 percent; in urban counties, pain medication overdoses rose 208 percent, and heroin overdoses rose 143 percent.

According to a recent story in the *New York Times*, analyzing death certificates across the US among young white adults, ages 25-34, “[t]he drug overdose numbers were stark. In 2014, the overdose death rate for whites ages 25 to 34 was five times its level in 1999, and the rate for 35- to 44-year-old whites tripled during that period. The numbers cover both illegal and prescription drugs.”

Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a report detailing the deaths of tens of thousands of people from overdosing on drugs, particularly opioids. The year 2014, it reported, saw 48,000 drug overdose deaths, the most of the current epidemic. Opioid overdose deaths rose by 14 percent from 2013 to 2014.

Communities within Appalachia and the Rust Belt region are particularly hit hard by it, where the obliteration of decent-paying jobs in manufacturing and mining has been very pronounced. Most of the states with the highest rates or sharp increases in drug overdoses are found in this area: West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Michigan.

The global slump continues to affect Pennsylvania. Southwestern Energy, a large natural gas producer, has announced that it will lay off more than 100 gas workers in northeastern Pennsylvania. GE Transportation has already let go 1,500 workers at a

locomotive manufacturing plant in Erie, Pennsylvania last year and has decided that more workers will be laid off this year. Joblessness is one of the main drivers of the growing epidemic of drug abuse.

Pennsylvania, meanwhile, is still trying to pass a long overdue budget, in which Democratic Governor Tom Wolf has signaled his support for the complete destruction of pensions for newly hired state workers and the privatization of the state-owned wine and liquor stores.



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