

Eastern Massachusetts outpaces the nation in heroin-fueled ER visits

CRAIG MURRAY/GateHouse News Service

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Eastern Massachusetts, including the South Shore, outpaces much of the nation in heroin-fueled emergency room visits and admissions to state treatment programs for opiate addictions, according to two recent federal reports on substance abuse.

The findings from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration highlight the state's struggle to reduce overdoses and deaths from heroin and prescription drugs such as OxyContin.

"We know and we've been saying for years we have an epidemic here in Massachusetts around heroin," said Vic DiGravio, president and CEO of the Association of Behavioral Healthcare, which represents drug and alcohol treatment providers. "That's in part being fed by the whole OxyContin epidemic."

On the South Shore, that struggle has been particularly visible in communities like Weymouth and Quincy where elected officials, police and advocates have been highlighting issues of heroin and opiate addiction for years.

One report found Boston and surrounding counties had a higher rate of emergency room visits involving illegal drugs in 2009 than 10 other major metropolitan areas, including New York City, Detroit and Chicago.

This region also ranked first for emergency room visits involving heroin. The analysis looked at hospital statistics from Middlesex, Essex, Norfolk, Plymouth and Suffolk counties, as well as Rockingham and Strafford counties in New Hampshire.

ER visits up 18% in 5 years

The report echoes the state's own statistics, which show nonfatal emergency room visits involving heroin or other opiates rose 18 percent statewide from fiscal 2002 to 2007, though the number dipped slightly in that final year.

Most of these emergency room visits involve a nonfatal overdose or some other serious emergency, said Michael Botticelli, director of the Bureau of Substance Abuse Services at the state Department of Public Health.

“Those kinds of acute visits can serve as an opportunity for folks to think about and access to treatment,” he said.

The reports’ findings came as no surprise to local police.

Weymouth police Lt. Richard Fuller said the increasing number of drug-related arrests in Weymouth only tells part of the story since some dealers and users are able to elude police.

“I have to think the emergency room admissions are a good barometer of the problem,” Fuller said, adding that a large part of the problem can be attributed to increased abuse of prescription painkillers. “It’s like an explosion of prescription drug use. It’s been going on for years, but not to this extent.”

Surge in heroin in N.E.

Quincy police responded to 101 opiate overdoses between October 2010 and the end of 2011, Lt. Patrick Glynn, head of the department’s drug unit, said. In 10 of those overdoses, the victim died.

“It is very obvious there’s been a huge surge in heroin in New England. There’s absolutely no doubt about it,” he said. “One sign is the increase in the amount of arrests and the amount of overdoses.”

The second federal report said Massachusetts is one of only four states where an illegal drug – in the Bay State’s case, heroin – outpaces alcohol as the most common reason for admission to state-funded substance abuse programs.

Heroin outpaces alcohol

The report said state-funded treatment programs had 38,594 admissions for heroin alone in 2009, compared to 34,844 involving alcohol. The data does not include information on the significant number of treatment programs funded by sources other than the state.

The same report also found that treatment admission rates for opiates other than heroin, such as OxyContin, were twice as high in New England as in any other region of the U.S. in 2009. In Massachusetts, there were 4,734 of these types of state treatment admissions that year, outpacing cocaine.

State records show that heroin outpaced alcohol as the most common drug addiction for which Quincy, Weymouth and Abington residents sought treatment in state-sponsored programs in fiscal 2010.

OxyContin leads to heroin

Nationally, admissions for people struggling with opiates other than heroin spiked 430 percent from 1999 to 2009, the federal report said.

In Massachusetts, many people first get hooked on prescription drugs such as OxyContin, then move on to heroin, which is sometimes cheaper and more accessible, DiGravio said.

The first federal report said Greater Boston had 571 emergency room visits involving illegal drugs per 100,000 people in 2009, well above the national rate of 317 per 100,000.

The rate of heroin-related emergency room visits in this region was 251 per 100,000 people, more than three times the national rate, the report said.

State hospitalization data from 2009 show the problem is not limited to any single part of Eastern Massachusetts. South of Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Taunton, Plymouth, New Bedford, Weymouth, Norwood, Stoughton and Quincy each had more than 200 people who suffered nonfatal overdoses in 2009.

Problem is widespread

But the problem of heroin and prescription painkiller abuse is even more widespread than those numbers reflect, said state Sen. John Keenan, D-Quincy, who is chairman of the Legislature's Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse.

"It's all over and it's not discriminating based on where somebody lives or what their economic situation is," he said.

Botticelli said the state tracks hospitalization data to figure out where it needs to focus treatment programs, grants and other resources.

The state is expanding training in the use of Narcan, a drug used to counter the effects of an opiate overdose, among addicts and their friends and family.

Police train with Narcan

In 2010, Quincy became the first police department in the state to train all officers to use Narcan and carry it in cruisers. Since then, officers have used it to save 53 overdose victims, Glynn, of the police drug unit, said.

Weymouth has held training sessions for addicts and their friends and relatives on how to use Narcan and handed out doses of the drug.

"There's still a ton of unmet need out there at all stages," DiGravio said.

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