

NDEWS National Drug Early Warning System

Funded at the Center for Substance Abuse Research by the National Institute on Drug Abuse

Highlights from NDEWS Sentinel Community Site 2019 Reports

Introduction

A unique feature of NDEWS is its capability to describe and compare drug use patterns and trends in selected communities across the United States. The NDEWS Coordinating Center works closely with Sentinel Community Epidemiologists (SCEs) in 12 Sentinel Community Sites (SCSs) across the U.S. (see

12 NDEWS Sentinel Community Sites, 2019



Figure). Emerging drugs and changing drug trends are monitored by each local SCE utilizing indicators such as drug overdose deaths, treatment admissions, hospital cases, poison center exposure calls, and law enforcement seizures. For their 2019 report, each SCE was asked to review available indicators and to identify up to five drugs they considered most important to summarize for their site.

According to the SCEs' annual reports, polysubstance use dominates local drug trends, illicit stimulant overdose deaths (many of which also involve opioids) are stable or increasing, and fentanyl remains the most lethal drug in many sites. In addition, several SCEs reported that minorities are becoming increasingly impacted by substance use in some areas, and that HIV and other infectious diseases are increasing. Many SCEs emphasized the role of multiple substances in drug overdose deaths, but their reports indicated that the types of drugs involved differed by site. Many sites are continuing to face high numbers of fentanyl-related drug overdose deaths or are

Five Evolving Trends Described in the 2019 NDEWS SCS Annual Reports

1. Polysubstance Use Plays a Prominent Role in Drug Overdose Deaths
2. Methamphetamine and Cocaine Overdose Deaths Are Stable or Increasing
3. Fentanyl Remains the Most Lethal Drug in Many NDEWS Sites
4. Minorities Are Becoming Increasingly Impacted by Substance Use in Some Areas
5. SCEs in Some NDEWS Sites Are Reporting Increases in HIV and Other Infectious Diseases

reporting that fentanyl plays an increasing role in deaths involving other drugs, such as cocaine. The rest of this report summarizes findings on these themes from the 12 SCSs. The complete SCS annual reports will be available on the NDEWS website: www.NDEWS.org.

Findings

The following sections explore the five evolving trends listed in the box on p. 1.

Polysubstance Use Plays a Prominent Role in Drug Overdose Deaths

Many of the SCEs reported on polysubstance use and related deaths. However, the specific drugs involved varied by region. For example, SCEs from eastern sites, such as New York City and Maine, discussed cocaine and fentanyl, while the SCE in San Francisco mentioned increases in methamphetamine overdose deaths that also involved fentanyl.

- **New York City: Sharp increase in cocaine-involved overdose deaths driven by opioids**
“Fentanyl accounts for 97% of the increase in cocaine-involved overdose deaths from 2015-2017.”
- **Maine: Cocaine sometimes combined with other drugs**
“Cocaine is playing an increasingly prominent role in drug indicators, particularly in combination with non-pharmaceutical opioids, as seen in deaths and law enforcement seizures.” “Cocaine is sometimes combined with heroin or fentanyl. . . . While seizures peaked in 2015 (cocaine-heroin) and 2018 (cocaine-fentanyl), deaths peaked in 2016 (cocaine-heroin) and 2017 (cocaine-fentanyl).”
- **Philadelphia: Cocaine and methamphetamine increasingly present in opioid deaths**
“In Philadelphia, cocaine and methamphetamine were increasingly present in overdose deaths in which opioids were found. Since 2010, there were smaller increases in overdose deaths involving these drugs without opioids.” “490 (82%) of the [597] cocaine-involved deaths in 2018 also involved an opioid, 79% of which included fentanyl. . . . 67 (93%) of the [75] methamphetamine-involved deaths in 2018 also involved an opioid, of which 93% included fentanyl.”

Cocaine in the Fentanyl Supply Poses Three Challenges for Public Health in New York City

1. People who use only cocaine are disproportionately susceptible to the risks associated with fentanyl.
2. People who use only cocaine may not be targeted by opioid-focused prevention strategies.
3. People who use cocaine intermittently may not be reached by any drug-focused prevention strategies or messages.

Source: Tuazon, E. *NDEWS New York City SCS Drug Use Patterns and Trends, 2019*.

- San Francisco: Increases in methamphetamine deaths driven by fentanyl**
 “Prior to 2015, increases in methamphetamine-related deaths were driven by deaths not involving opioids. Since 2015, increases in methamphetamine-related deaths have been driven by fentanyl involvement.”
- Denver Metro: Polysubstance-related deaths continue to be the norm**
 “In Denver County in 2018, 64% of the 209 drug-related deaths involved 3 or more drugs in the deceased’s system.”

Methamphetamine and Cocaine Overdose Deaths Are Stable or Increasing

Indicators for methamphetamine and cocaine are mixed across the NDEWS sentinel sites. Methamphetamine deaths were generally stable or increasing in 2018 in western sites except for San Francisco; cocaine deaths were generally stable or increasing in eastern and midwestern sites such as Maine and Wayne County (Detroit Area). In general, cocaine indicators tended to be higher in the eastern sites, while methamphetamine indicators tended to be higher in the western sites. Methamphetamine was not mentioned as a primary drug of concern by three SCEs in the eastern U.S.: New York City, Philadelphia, and Wayne County (Detroit Area). In contrast, cocaine was not mentioned as

Cocaine and Methamphetamine Admissions to Drug Treatment Programs, 2018

Recent trends in admissions to drug treatment programs with cocaine and methamphetamine as the primary substance are similar to those discussed in overdose deaths. Higher percentages of admissions with cocaine as a primary substance are found in the east (with the exception of Maine) and higher percentages of admissions with methamphetamine as the primary substance are found in the west (with the exception of Atlanta Metro).

Four of the five eastern sites had 10% or more of admissions with cocaine as a primary substance. In contrast, all five of the western sites reported 12% or more of admissions with methamphetamine as a primary substance in 2018 while all of the eastern sites except Atlanta Metro reported 1% or fewer of admissions with methamphetamine as a primary substance. The percentage remained relatively stable in all sites from 2017 to 2018, except for Atlanta Metro and King County (Seattle Area) which both reported increases.

Percentage of Admissions with Cocaine and Methamphetamine Cited as Primary Substance, 2018

	Cocaine	Methamphetamine
Maine	5.4%	1.4%
New York City	11.6%	1.1%
Philadelphia	11.4	0.8*
Atlanta Metro	9.7	11.8
Southeastern Florida	10.5	1
Wayne County (Detroit Area)	12.9	0.3
Chicago Metro	7.2	0.4
Denver Metro	4.2	15.8
Texas	7.8	17.6*
King County (Seattle Area)	4.1	12.5
San Francisco	6.1	17.0
Los Angeles County	4.0	30.0

*Includes amphetamine and methamphetamine

a primary drug of concern by three SCEs in the western U.S.: King County (Seattle Area), San Francisco, and Los Angeles County.

Changes in Cocaine Use and Availability

- **Maine: Cocaine deaths increased from 2013 to 2017**
“Cocaine deaths . . . have increased from 10 to 90 since 2013, holding steady in the past 12 months [from 2017 to 2018].”
- **Denver Metro: Cocaine-related deaths approaching 2007 peak**
“Cocaine-related deaths in Colorado are approaching the peak of 2.7/100,000 in 2007, with 2.1/100,000 in 2018.”
- **Atlanta Metro: Cocaine stable at rates below methamphetamine**
“Once dominant in Atlanta, the use of cocaine/crack is stable at rates below methamphetamine. Users are the oldest of any cohort, most likely to be African American, and smoking. There has been a slight decrease in Georgia Medical Examiner data from a 10-year high in 2017.”
- **Texas: Cocaine and methamphetamine are leading drugs**
“Methamphetamine and cocaine are the leading drugs in Texas in terms of poison center calls, deaths, and tox laboratory reports.”

Changes in Methamphetamine Use and Availability

- **Atlanta Metro: Record levels of methamphetamine**
“The number of statewide decedents testing positive for methamphetamine at the time of death in 2018 is at an all-time high.” “Multiple methamphetamine data indicators have reached record levels indicating increased use of the drug (NFLIS, treatment, and Georgia Medical Examiner data).”
- **Maine: Increase in Canadian-distributed methamphetamine**
“Lab incidents and arrests peaked in 2016, and deaths and admissions continued to rise in 2017. Seizures peaked in 2014 and again in 2018. The [Maine] DEA reports an increase in Canadian-distributed methamphetamine”
- **Chicago Metro: Ice (methamphetamine) was identified as a new drug in some areas**
“Ice methamphetamine of low cost and high quality has replaced locally produced methamphetamine and is said to be generating a new wave of users spanning a broad range of demographic characteristics” in rural southern Illinois counties.
- **Los Angeles County: Notable increases in 2018 for methamphetamine across indicators (continuing many years of increases)**
“Methamphetamine continues to be a major problem in Los Angeles County.” “Medical Examiner toxicology cases (2018): 1,126 (of 2,930 reported cases) tested positive for methamphetamine, a substantial increase over [the 837 cases reported in] 2017”

- **Denver Metro: Increases across indicators**

“Methamphetamine was involved in 40% of the drug-related deaths reported by Denver’s Office of the Medical Examiner (OME) in 2018.” “Methamphetamine continues to increase across indicators, including drug-related death/poisoning in Denver, the 9-County Denver Metro area, and Colorado.”

- **San Francisco: Increases across most measures of methamphetamine use and related morbidity and mortality**

“Emergency department visits and hospitalizations in particular have increased sharply since 2013.” “The SFDPH initiated a Methamphetamine Task Force in April 2019 to review the surge in methamphetamine-related morbidity and mortality. The Task Force will meet four times and produce a report before the end of 2019.”

- **Texas: Methamphetamine indicators increasing**

Even “after the formula [for methamphetamine] was changed [from pseudoephedrine to phenyl-2-propanone] the indicators continue to increase, which shows the methamphetamine epidemic is continuing, and the increased purity and potency will further increase treatment demand.”

Fentanyl Remains the Most Lethal Drug in Many NDEWS Sites

Are there signs that total overdose deaths or opioid overdose deaths may be leveling or decreasing in eastern sites initially hit hard by fentanyl? NDEWS Coordinating Center staff are actively working with the SCEs to explore what is driving the potential trends highlighted below.

- The SCEs from Maine and Wayne County (Detroit Area) reported decreases in total overdose deaths, but subtle nuances were apparent in the specific drugs showing decreases. For example, in Wayne County the total number of drug overdose deaths decreased in 2018, but the number involving fentanyl as a cause of death increased.

- **Maine: Deaths due to non-pharmaceutical fentanyl peaked in 2017 and decreased slightly in 2018**

“Non-pharmaceutical opioid drugs, predominantly fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, remain the most lethal drug category. However, 2018 overdose deaths have declined 15%, fentanyl deaths by 12%, and heroin deaths by 16%, constituting the first overall decrease in nine years.”

- **New York City: Fentanyl increasingly involved in drug overdose deaths**

“Using toxicology data, New York City identified fentanyl in 2% of drug overdose deaths from 2000 to 2012. . . By 2017, fentanyl was involved in 57% of all drug overdose deaths in New York City.”

- **Philadelphia: Fentanyl-involved deaths decreased slightly in 2018**

“After rising sharply in recent years, deaths involving fentanyl fell slightly in 2018. Nonetheless, fentanyl was found in 84% of overdose deaths in which any opioid was found.”

- **Chicago Metro: Fentanyl-involved opioid deaths have increased**

The number of opioid overdose deaths decreased in Cook County (which includes Chicago) and remained level in Will County in 2018. However, the percentage of opioid deaths with fentanyl or fentanyl analogues present continued to increase in both counties (Cook from 15% in 2015 to 71% in 2018; Will from 8% to 65%).

- **Fentanyl continues to be found in a high percentage of opioid overdose deaths in eastern sites.**

For example, fentanyl was found in more than 70% of opioid-involved overdose deaths in Chicago Metro, Wayne County (Detroit Area), and Philadelphia in 2018. The SCEs from Chicago (seizures) and Wayne County (deaths) mentioned, however, that there were fewer fentanyl analogs found in 2018 than in 2017.

Western sites with traditionally low levels of opioid use reported low but increasing numbers of fentanyl overdose deaths.

- **Denver Metro: Fentanyl still relatively uncommon**

“Fentanyl/fentanyl analogues are still relatively uncommon compared to other parts of the country, but contribute an increasingly higher number of drug-related deaths/poisonings in Denver, the 9-County Denver Metro area, and Colorado.”

- **San Francisco: Deaths involving fentanyl increasing**

“Deaths involving only prescription opioids have decreased while those involving fentanyl have increased. Fentanyl was involved in 6% of opioid deaths in 2014 and 49% of opioid-related deaths in 2018.”

Minorities Are Becoming Increasingly Impacted by Substance Use in Some Areas

Three SCEs reported increases in drug use or drug overdose deaths among minority populations.

- **Atlanta Metro: Methamphetamine spreading to African American community**

“Methamphetamine is no longer confined to Atlanta’s white population and is spreading into the local African American community.”

- **New York City: Increase in drug poisoning deaths among African Americans**

The SCE reported an increase in unintentional drug poisoning deaths among African Americans from 2015-2017. Fentanyl and cocaine are both part of the story. There were 185 more deaths involving fentanyl in 2017 compared to 2015 and 47 more deaths involving cocaine.

- **Wayne County (Detroit Area): Increase in drug overdose deaths among African Americans**

Although drug overdose deaths decreased 17.6% among Caucasians, they increased among African Americans (4%) and Latinos (9.5%).

SCEs in Some NDEWS Sites Are Reporting Increases in HIV and Other Infectious Diseases

SCEs in three different regions of the United States reported that they are monitoring some of the highest rates of HIV diagnoses since the 1980s.

- **Texas: Highest rate of new HIV diagnoses among men who have sex with men since 1987**
“The Texas case rate for new HIV diagnoses among men who have sex with men was 71% in 1987 and 20 years later it is back to 71%.” The SCE also reported “increases in HIV among males, particularly males of color, over this 20 year period.”
- **King County (Seattle Area): Cluster of HIV diagnoses among homeless**
“In 2018, disease investigation and molecular HIV surveillance in Seattle, Washington, identified 14 related HIV diagnoses among heterosexuals who were living homeless, most of whom injected drugs. From 2017 to mid-November 2018, the number of HIV diagnoses among heterosexuals in King County, Washington, who inject drugs increased 286%” (Golden et al., 2019, “Outbreak of Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection Among Heterosexual Persons Who Are Living Homeless and Inject Drugs — Seattle, Washington, 2018,” *MMWR* 68(15), p. 347).

Limitations

The terminology used for drug-related/drug-caused deaths varies slightly from site to site. The data for many sites is labeled as preliminary and may change slightly. Lack of information about a particular drug or drug trend in a site does not indicate that the drug is not available or the trend not apparent. Rather it simply means that the SCE did not include it in his/her 2019 annual report as one of the most important to summarize for their site. See individual reports for 2019 and prior years for details.