(U) Analysis of Drug-Related Overdose Deaths in Allegheny County (Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania, in 2015

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(U) Overview

(U) The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Philadelphia Field Division (PFD) Intelligence Program analyzed demographic and toxicology data derived from drug-related overdose deaths occurring in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (including the City of Pittsburgh) during 2015. The analysis revealed that in 2015, Allegheny County’s drug-related overdose death rate per 100,000 people was 32.75, which is higher than the Pennsylvania average of 21.9, and significantly exceeds the national average of 16.15.

(U) The abuse of illicit drugs, specifically heroin, cocaine, and the opioid fentanyl, has contributed to an increase in drug-related overdose deaths in Allegheny County over the last decade. Specifically, drug-related overdose deaths have risen 73 percent since 2010, with a corresponding four and five-fold increase in heroin and fentanyl drug mentions in toxicology test results, respectively.

(U) Significance

(U) The PFD Intelligence Program maintains a relationship with the Allegheny County Office of the Medical Examiner (ACOME) through which historical and current information associated with drug-related overdose deaths is shared, upon request. These requests are made in support of strategic intelligence collection to identify current and emerging trends in drug availability and abuse.

(U) In 2015, toxicology test results from more than 59 percent of drug-related overdose decedents in Allegheny County indicated the presence of heroin. In addition, cocaine abuse continues to be a drug threat in Allegheny County, as 29 percent of drug-related overdose decedents indicated the presence of cocaine in 2015. However, the recent introduction of fentanyl and fentanyl analogues into the illicit drug supply greatly increases the potential for overdose and death. The abuse of illicit drugs (specifically heroin and cocaine) and fentanyl contributed to a 28 percent increase in drug-related overdose deaths in Allegheny County from 2014 to 2015. Moreover, overdose deaths in Allegheny County with the presence of fentanyl increased more than 1,200 percent between 2013 and 2015.

(U) Intelligence reports from law enforcement and public health officials indicate that users actively seek powerful opioids, such as heroin containing fentanyl and fentanyl analogues. Acetyl fentanyl, a fentanyl analogue, emerged in this dataset in 2015 and was present in 24 deaths, a trend that is mirrored in Central Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and across the country.

(U) The conclusions drawn from analyzing the data confirm the widely reported trend of prescription opioid abusers switching to heroin. For example, notable increases in heroin/fentanyl-positive mentions correspond to decreases in oxycodone and hydrocodone-positive mentions during the reviewed years.

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a (U) The Allegheny County Medical Examiner evaluates the presence of each drug based on toxicology test results and makes the determination as to the classification of heroin versus morphine-related deaths.
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(U) Drug-Related Overdose Death Data

(U) ACOME conducts analysis on drug-related overdose decedents in its jurisdiction, to include gender, race, age, and drugs present in toxicology test results. Allegheny County’s population is estimated to be 1.2 million people; approximately 48 percent male, 81 percent white, 13.4 percent African-American, and 2 percent Hispanic. The information below represents ACOME’s shared analysis.

(U) Demographics/Locations

(U) ACOME identified 393 drug-related overdose decedents for 2015; this represents a 28 percent increase in drug-related overdose deaths in Allegheny County from 2014, and a 73 percent increase since 2010. As seen in Figure 1, drug overdose deaths were concentrated among whites, males, and the 30-39 age group.

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(U) Figure 1: Gender, Race, and Age Range of Drug-Related Overdose Decedents, Allegheny County, PA, 2015.

Source: Allegheny County Office of the Medical Examiner

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b (U) ACOME reporting through April 13, 2016
(U) In addition, ACOME provided the zip code of the death location for drug-related overdose decedents in 2015 (see Figure 2).

Source: Allegheny County Office of the Medical Examiner
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(U) Toxicology Test Results

(U) ACOME reported the percentage of cases involving certain drugs identified in toxicology test results for drug-related overdose decedents in 2015 (see Figure 3).

(U) Figure 3: Percentage of Drug-Related Overdose Cases by Excerpted Drug, Allegheny County, PA, 2015 (Based on 393 Decedents).

(UNCLASSIFIED) Figure 3: Percentage of Drug-Related Overdose Cases by Excerpted Drug, Allegheny County, PA, 2015 (Based on 393 Decedents).

Source: Allegheny County Office of the Medical Examiner

(U) As shown above, heroin was identified most frequently among Allegheny County overdose decedents in 2015; however, fentanyl mentions increased 9 percent from 2014. In addition, acetyl fentanyl, an analogue of fentanyl also used as an adulterant to heroin, was identified on 24 occasions (6 percent of cases) after not being identified at all in 2014.
(U) ACOME also reported the number of drug mentions identified in toxicology test results for drug-related overdose decedents from 2010 through 2015 (see Figure 4).

(U) Heroin mentions increased four-fold from 2010 to 2015; however, the largest growth was in fentanyl mentions, increasing five-fold from 2010 to 2015 and most notably after 2013, when fentanyl was believed to be introduced into the Allegheny County heroin supply. Cocaine mentions decreased steadily between 2010 and 2013 before rebounding to its highest levels in 2015. This increase corresponds with law enforcement intelligence indicating increased cocaine supply in the region in 2015.

(U) The opioid oxycodone decreased 17 percent from a high of 51 mentions in 2011 to 42 mentions in 2015. Hydrocodone mentions also decreased 35 percent between 2010 and 2015. These findings are consistent with the trend that prescription opioid users migrated to heroin abuse, and the heroin purchased often contained fentanyl.

Source: Allegheny County Office of the Medical Examiner
(U) Outlook

(U) The data presented in this report clearly confirms the observations and reporting of law enforcement officials, public health professionals, and the public/media in the last 3 to 5 years, that rampant drug abuse, of heroin in particular, constitutes a public health crisis in Allegheny County. Significant increases in overdose deaths related to heroin and fentanyl since 2013 indicate that this problem will most likely continue into 2016 without the concerted efforts of law enforcement agencies and public health officials working together to share vital information that will help reduce both supply and demand. In the meantime, it can be expected that addicts’ continued demand for a highly potent product will result in distributors attempting to satisfy that demand by mixing even more dangerous additives with already near-pure heroin or other illicit drugs, unbeknownst to users who will likely become overdose victims.

4 (U) DEA Philadelphia Investigative Reporting, December 2015; extracted information is: (U); overall document classification is: (U).
6 (U) DEA Philadelphia Investigative Reporting, December 2015; extracted information is: (U); overall document classification is: (U).
7 (U) Ibid.
8 (U) Ibid.