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The high local cost of opioid abuse

By Colin McNickle

The human carnage from America's growing opioid overdose epidemic finds itself documented nearly every day in the media. And each new story seems to be more gut-wrenching than the last.

Particularly sobering have been the stories of mothers and fathers found in motor vehicles in an opiate-induced comatose state with small children in the vehicle with them.

Tragically, as bad as the problem has become nationally, it is far worse in many Greater Pittsburgh counties, some with fatal overdose rates at double the national rate.

"Clearly, Southwest Pennsylvania has a major problem with drug abuse," say scholars at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (*in Policy Brief Vol. 17, No. 22*).

And with the horrendous human toll from this drug scourge comes annual economic effects in the billions of dollars nationally and in the hundreds of millions of dollars locally, say Jake Haulk, president of the Pittsburgh think tank, and Eric Montarti, a senior policy analyst there.

Nationally, opioid overdose deaths climbed from 20,000 in 2008 to 33,000 in 2015, the last year for which statistics are available. That's a death rate of 10.6 per 100,000, paced by rocketing heroin overdose deaths. Overdose rates from all drugs rose from 35,000 in 2008 to 55,000 in 2015 for a death rate of 17.1 per 100,000.

Locally, and citing data from the Pennsylvania Coroners Association, Haulk and Montarti say Allegheny County's 2015 fatal overdose rate from all drugs was 33.6 per 100,000 people, nearly double the national rate. Double, too, was the county's fatal overdose rate for prescribed opioids and heroin.

There were 414 drug overdose deaths in Allegheny County in 2015. Up to 300 were blamed on opiates, primarily prescription painkillers and heroin. That's up from 168 since 2008.

The news was no less discouraging for some surrounding counties. To wit, the overall drug deaths per 100,000 were 35.2 in Westmoreland County, 37.6 in Greene County and 41.8 in Armstrong County. And with the human cost comes eye-popping economic costs, the Allegheny Institute researchers remind.

One study estimated the national health care, workplace and criminal justice cost of either addiction or fatal overdose at \$55.7 billion in 2007. Another study pegged the 2013 cost of prescription opioid abuse at \$78.5 billion. Yet another study of employees at large self-insured firms found opioid abusers' health care costs were four times as large as non-abusers.

A conservative extrapolation of the national data (again, based on 2015 figures) suggests the annual cost for health care, crime and lost wages and benefits in Allegheny County ranges from \$175 million to \$350 million for heroin abuse and between \$236 million and \$472 million for opioid abuse, Haulk and Montarti calculate.

For Westmoreland County, those costs would range from \$51 million to \$102 million for heroin and from \$54 million to \$108 million for opioid medicines.

“It is important to note that all the estimates are just that although they are likely reasonable approximations of costs,” Haulk and Montarti say. “They will diverge from actual costs depending on unknown errors in applying national data to the local area and the degree of accuracy of the national findings in the studies used to estimate the local impact.”

But even with such qualifiers, the Allegheny Institute scholars say one thing is certain: “These estimates show the economic cost of opioid abuse to be very high.”

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