

LOCAL NEWS

## Heroin use fuels surge of ER visits among California millennials



File photo of suspected “China White” heroin — a pure form of heroin — during a probation search.



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California’s millennials continue to flood hospital emergency departments because of heroin, a trend that has increased steadily statewide and in Los Angeles and Orange counties over the past five years, according to the latest figures.

The state data released last week show that in the first three months of 2016, 412 adults age 20 to 29 went to emergency departments due to heroin. That’s double the number for the same time period in 2012.

Overall, emergency department visits among heroin users of all ages increased, but the sharpest was among the state’s young adults. About 1,500 emergency department visits by California’s millennials poisoned by heroin were logged in 2015 compared with fewer than 1,000 in 2012.

Emergency responders, those who work in recovery programs, and parents of children addicted to heroin say the figures are unsurprising given the increase in prescription painkiller abuse that likely has led more young people to use heroin.

“One of the unintended consequences of this prescription drug epidemic has been the increase in heroin addiction and overdoses, in part due to the transition from prescription opioids to less expensive heroin street drugs,” according to state health officials. “Heroin deaths have continued to increase steadily by 67 percent since 2006 and account for a growing share of the total opioid-related deaths.”

It’s affected people from many communities, no matter their background, said Dr. Crescenzo Pisano, an internist who specializes in addiction and addiction medicine at [Providence Little Company of Mary Medical Center in San Pedro.](#)

Pisano, who has been there since 1984, said he used to see more heroin users from the harbor areas. No more.

“The high school athlete to the kid next door. It’s no longer people from the seedy side of town,” Pisano said.

With drugs like oxycodone becoming more difficult to find and expensive on the streets, young users are turning to the next cheapest high.

“People price themselves out of range,” he said. “Relatively affluent, well-to-do kids start stealing and find heroin is cheaper to use.”

By some estimates, one pill of oxycodone can cost \$80 on the street. A bag of heroin costs \$5.

The latest data, provided by [California’s Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development](#), show that Los Angeles County continues to see a steady increase in emergency department visits by millennials who use heroin, from 114 in the first nine months of 2010 to 237 for the same time period 2016. The emergency department visits nearly tripled in Orange County from 81 to 206 for the same time period.

But among that same group, the number of visits are beginning to dip in Riverside County, from 89 to 68 cases as well as in San Bernardino County, where the number fell from 54 to 49 visits.

Still, some parents and those who work in drug treatment programs continue to see heroin as a major drug issue that isn’t going away.

Jody Waxman saw it firsthand. Her son was 23 when she realized he was addicted to heroin.

“He went to the emergency department a number of times,” said the San Fernando Valley woman. “He once almost died on my living room floor. He had gotten a hold of heroin laced with other drugs. It was very bad. “

When Waxman realized he was addicted, she felt shame. But she got him help, and at 55 years old, she went back to school and earned her certificate in drug and alcohol treatment. She now sits on the board of directors for a parent and youth support group called Because I Love You, or BILY. At least 75 percent of those Waxman helps are addicted to heroin, she said.

She knows it’s not easy for parents to face, especially those in suburban communities.

“When this came up, I had to deal with this addiction issue,” she said. “We are a nice, middle-class family, Jewish family. What the hell happened? The whole drug issue is huge.“

Waxman agreed that because prescription drugs are more difficult to get, more millennials and all others are turning to heroin.

“For millennials, because of what they are going through in their life, not being able to handle feelings and past traumas, they can get heroin anywhere from on any street corner. The dealers come to you.”

Last month, Simi Valley police cracked a heroin delivery ring after months of undercover work.

The investigation began after the deaths last year of two Simi Valley men who had ordered the drug through a delivery service, according to published reports. As a result, three men from Simi Valley, Torrance and Fullerton were arrested.

Waxman said her son is now 26, sober and engaged, and talks about his past openly. But she said it takes ongoing dialogue among parents and their children to raise awareness about addiction.

“The solution is education,” Waxman said. “If we can educate the parents, and tell them you are not your child’s friend. You have to lock up your medicine cabinets. You have to know who are your child’s friends.”

Because I Love You meetings are held from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Tuesdays at Granada Hills Charter High School

10535 Zelzah Avenue Granada Hills. For more information on meetings, call 818-884-8242 or go to [www.bily.org/](http://www.bily.org/)

• Emergency room visits due to heroin poisoning, patients ages 20-29:

2010

Los Angeles County: 114

Orange County: 81

Riverside County: 21

San Bernardino County: 26

2011

Los Angeles County: 131

Orange County: 107

Riverside County: 37

San Bernardino County: 43

2012

Los Angeles County: 170

Orange County: 133

Riverside County: 46

San Bernardino County: 38

2013

Los Angeles County: 201

Orange County: 190

Riverside County: 76

San Bernardino County: 38

2014

Los Angeles County: 215

Orange County: 200

Riverside County: 84

San Bernardino County: 65

2015

Los Angeles County: 229

Orange County: 207

Riverside County: 89

San Bernardino County: 54

2016

Los Angeles County: 237

Orange County: 206

Riverside County: 68

San Bernardino County: 49

\*Source: California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development

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