

# Spike in heroin use subject of San Fernando Valley symposium



By **SUSAN ABRAM** | [bysusanabram@gmail.com](mailto:bysusanabram@gmail.com)

PUBLISHED: January 15, 2014 at 10:07 p.m. | UPDATED: August 28, 2017 at 7:53 a.m.

---

His confession came by phone on a Tuesday night.

“Mom, I need help,” Jody Waxman heard. “I’m a heroin addict.”

Waxman, a Winnetka resident, had known her son had smoked pot as a teen. But she didn’t know how deep his drug addiction had sunk. She blamed herself, she said, but she also blames a community for staying silent. Many parents, Waxman later learned, knew that heroin was as easy to buy as soda from a vending machine.

“I didn’t really know he was into that,” Waxman said of her son. “I didn’t know about the heroin, until I got that phone call from him.”

While it seemed to have leveled off since the 1990s, heroin is flowing again in the veins of Americans, but this time, the drug is leaving quiet tracks on younger arms. The problem has escalated so much across the Los Angeles region that a parent support group will hold what is being touted as the San Fernando Valley’s first heroin symposium in years at 6:30 tonight at Granada Hills Charter High School, to raise awareness among parents, children, teachers and politicians.

“We’ve seen an increase in the San Fernando Valley probably beginning 10 years ago, but it takes a long time before it gets widespread exposure,” Los Angeles Police Detective James Williams said of the cheap, black tar heroin from Mexico that is found in western states. “It’s just hitting this area where it traditionally hasn’t.”

The San Fernando Valley's problem isn't unique. Simi Valley saw a reported 14 fatal overdoses due to heroin in 2011. The city has since formed a task force with police, schools and the parks department. Last summer, Simi Valley joined the cities of Santa Clarita and Thousand Oaks and organized a similar symposium.

And heroin has made a significant comeback nationwide. A report released by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that pot use rose slightly from 2007 to 2012, but heroin use sharply spiked. The number of Americans aged 12 and older who used heroin nearly doubled, from 373,000 in 2007 to 669,000 in 2012.

"It's very scary to think we have a whole generation of young people using heroin out there," said Sarah Pullen, a spokeswoman for the Drug Enforcement Administration. "We were starting to see heroin stay stable."

Williams, who works with the narcotic enforcement detail within the LAPD's Devonshire Division, said the increase is due to a confluence of issues, including less funding for drug prevention programs in schools and for law enforcement, prescription drug abuse among teens looking for a cheaper fix, and denial by parents who thought heroin was a drug of the past or who don't want to address the issue.

"Teens usually abuse opiates first," Williams said of the pain killers they find in medicine cabinets. "Then, after they get hooked, they can't afford it, so they buy heroin because it's cheaper."

The price of heroin hasn't changed in 10 years, Williams said. While a single prescription pill can cost \$5 to \$80, black tar heroin is about \$20 for a small bag, he said. Most kids smoke it, but Williams said he and other officers are beginning to see needle tracks appear on arms again.

The addicts are much younger than in the past, Williams added.

And heroin still kills. Of the 3,000 mostly accidental drug deaths in 2010, 8.2 percent were related to heroin. Five years earlier, that figure was 6 percent, according to an annual report released by the Los Angeles County Department of Coroner's.

Tonight's symposium, featuring police, physicians and other speakers, is being organized by the group Because I Love You, which was founded by Dennis Poncher more than 30 years ago to help parents of children with behavioral problems. B.I.L.Y. is a nonprofit, volunteer organization working in 24 states.

"Back then, I dealt with parents whose children were drinking alcohol, and occasionally talked about using pot," Poncher said. "Now, at least 80 percent come to us because of drugs. What I'm dealing with now is parents are part of the problem and we want them to be part of the solution. They are not into parenting. They feel the schools should be handling their kids."

Poncher said he hopes parents will bring their children to tonight's symposium.

“I’m hoping the youth will sit there and say, uh oh, my parents are getting educated about this,” Poncher said. “I guess my parents are going to start watching me. I want the kids to know we are concerned parents and it’s not a popularity contest. We don’t care if they like us or if they hate us.”

Waxman, who helped organize tonight’s event, joined B.I.L.Y. when her son was having behavioral problems. “I was one of those moms who closed their eyes,” she said, of her son, who is now 23, and in rehab.

“The thing is with heroin, the dealers are giving it away to start, because once you do it once or twice, you’re hooked,” she said.

“I hope parents are smart enough to take this opportunity to come to this symposium and see what’s going on.”

The “Heroin Kills” symposium will be held at 6:30 p.m., Granada Hills Charter School, 10535 Zelzah Ave. For more information, see [www.bily.org](http://www.bily.org).



**2014 > January > 15**