

Ohio sees record high heroin overdose deaths

By Andrew Welsh-huggins, Associated Press

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — A record number of Ohioans died from heroin-related overdoses in 2012, the state Department of Health said as it released the newest available figures for a problem that's been called an epidemic and a public health crisis.

The state says 680 people died of heroin overdoses in 2012, up from 426 deaths in 2011, a 37 percent increase, according to data being released Friday.

The heroin increase also drove the overall number of fatal drug overdoses to a record of 1,272 deaths in 2012, up from 1,154 the previous year.

The state said the number of fatal prescription painkiller overdoses decreased for the first time since 2003, a drop attributed to a statewide crackdown on pill mills and the overprescribing of pain pills.

Heroin addiction has been increasing as prescription painkiller abusers turn to the cheaper and more readily available drug.

"What we're seeing is a significant number of people moving to a more acute phase of their addiction disorder," said Orman Hall, director of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

A decade of unrestricted prescribing of painkillers led to an addicted population, which in turn led to the heroin problem, said Christy Beeghley, program administrator for the Health Department's Injury Prevention Program.

The Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner released more recent statistics earlier in the year, announcing 195 heroin-related fatalities in 2013, up from 161 the year before. In 2007, 40 people in the Cleveland-area died of heroin-related overdoses.

Fatal drug overdoses remain the leading cause of accidental death in Ohio, above car crashes, a trend that began in 2007.

Ohio is not alone in high numbers of heroin deaths. In Massachusetts, Gov. Deval Patrick last month declared a public health emergency in response to heroin overdoses and opioid addiction. Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin dedicated his entire State of the State address this year to the problem. Minnesota authorities have seen a tenfold increase in the number of people seeking treatment for heroin addiction.

Attorney General Mike DeWine has called the heroin deaths an "epidemic" and created a statewide investigative unit to crack down on heroin dealers. U.S. Attorney Steven Dettelbach in

Cleveland has labeled the problem a "public health crisis."

Midway through 2011, Ohio enacted a law meant to reduce the number of pills-on-demand clinics where many addicts were receiving pain pills under questionable circumstances.

Authorities are optimistic that a law that took effect last month increasing access to a drug overdose antidote will reduce the number of deaths.

The state is also encouraged by a recent youth survey that found significant decreases in painkiller use by young Ohioans, Hall said.

In central Ohio, Marin Riggs died of a heroin overdose on Jan. 28, 2012, two weeks after her 20th birthday. She became addicted just 18 months earlier after smoking it, then turning to intravenous injections.

Riggs was a high school athlete in Pickerington in suburban Columbus, the last person one could imagine becoming a heroin addict, said her mother, Heidi Riggs.

"She loved life. She had good friends. She was funny. She was bright," her mother said. "She was your all-American teenager."

But Marin also suffered from self-esteem issues and may have felt bullied in school about her weight, her mother said. After her graduation the family began to notice missing spoons — used to dissolve heroin — and unusual expenses, such as \$300 in gas on a company fuel card of her father's. They learned of her addiction after she was required to submit to a drug test after being charged in a traffic accident.

Marin couldn't shake the grip of heroin despite stints in rehab and attendance at AA meetings. She overdosed at home after six months of sobriety. Her mother now works for DeWine trying to educate people about heroin's dangers.

"She knew she could die from it, but the grip that it had on her, and the way it made her feel, she'd go right back to it," Heidi Riggs said.