

Researchers find heroin, cocaine top drug treatment admissions in King County; prescription-type opiates cause most deaths

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A community workgroup led by UW research scientist Caleb Banta-Green, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, unveiled today the King County 2008 annual drug trends report. Heroin and cocaine led the list of county drug treatment admissions, according to the study. Prescription-type opiates caused the most deaths in 2008, with individuals 50 years and older accounting for 39 percent of deaths.

Key findings include:

Heroin continues to be a problem locally, though deaths related to heroin use in 2008 declined slightly to 59 out of 256 total drug-caused deaths. In addition:

- Twenty-four percent of decedents were under age 30, a figure similar to that in 2007 and up slightly from the previous seven years.
- Heroin treatment admissions were second only to cocaine among illegal drugs for adults, with an increase in the number (240) and proportion (13 percent) of young adults ages 18 to 25, compared with numbers from a decade ago.
- At the same time, both the number (401) and proportion (22 percent) of treatment admissions for individuals over age 50 doubled from 1999 through 2008.

"While we think of an aging cohort of heroin users, there are also new young users we identified in the study," said Banta-Green. "These young users were detected in treatment admissions and fatalities in King County."

Banta-Green said prescription opiate abuse continues to impact youth, young adults and older adults in King County. Drug-related deaths involving prescription opiates totaled 153 in 2008--more than double the number of deaths from any other substance.

People over age 50 accounted for 39 percent of deaths involving prescription opiates. Eighty-four percent of those deaths involved other substances as well, including [alcohol](#), anti-anxiety medications, cocaine and heroin.

The total number of treatment admissions related primarily to prescription opiate abuse increased from 87 in 1999 to 614 in 2008 in the county; the biggest proportion (51 percent) of those admissions was 18 to 29 year-olds in 2008.

Adolescent survey data indicate opiate abuse among an even younger age group, which suggests these problems will continue in years to come. Statistics collected by several state agencies in the 2008 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey found that eight percent of 10th--graders in King County used prescription opiates to get high in the past month.

Based on the report and related findings, the authors said there is some evidence that local drug users are switching from pharmaceuticals to heroin. Data collected by Public Health-Seattle & King County in May 2009 at the county's syringe exchanges indicates that 39 percent of heroin users reported being "hooked on prescription opiates" before they began using heroin. Younger respondents were more likely to indicate being hooked on pharmaceuticals first.

Methamphetamine indicators appear to have leveled off over the past four years in King County. Deaths continue to be relatively uncommon, with 13 drug-caused deaths involving methamphetamine in 2008. This figure is a decrease from a peak of 24 in 2005.

Treatment admissions for meth use have held steady at approximately 1,300 per year for adults over the past four years, while youth admissions declined from 68 in 2004 to 18 in 2008. Among those age 18 to 25, methamphetamine treatment admissions exceeded cocaine admissions in 2008. "While methamphetamine is generally thought to be a larger problem outside of King County, treatment admissions for young adults age 18 to 25 for methamphetamine surpassed those for cocaine in the county," said Banta-Green.

Cocaine continues to cause substantial health problems in King County. Data showed 71 cocaine-involved deaths out of 256 total drug-caused deaths in 2008. What's more, adult treatment admissions for cocaine have climbed steadily to the highest level in at least a decade, with large increases in the numbers of clients ages 18 to 25 years, and 40 and older.

Cocaine was the most common drug identified in emergency department visits in the greater Seattle metropolitan area in 2008, with 27 percent of major substance reports or 3,631 patient visits.

The King County drug trends report is available online at the UW Alcohol and [Drug Abuse](#) Institute.

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