

Deaths Tied To Drug Use On Way Up County Tops Among 23 Regions In Florida

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Cocaine-related deaths in Palm Beach County have quadrupled in the past 15 years, pushing the county past Miami-Dade to the top of a list of 23 Florida regions analyzed in a recent state medical examiners' report.

Last year, 197 people died with traces of cocaine in their system. Fifteen years ago, it was 47.

But last year's totals show the majority -- 154 people -- had other substances in their systems. Statistics in the report released this week do not outline how many of the 1991 deaths involved other substances.

"There are so many variations. What are the contributing causes?" asked Capt. Karl Durr, who heads the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office narcotics division. "I would doubt that the overdoses are from pure cocaine."

Durr, though, declined to comment on the report because he hadn't reviewed it. Simply looking at the numbers might not offer a full picture of what's going on, he said.

Even so, there is a clear downward trend in cocaine-related deaths in Miami-Dade, which posted figures as high as 330 deaths in the past 15 years, while Palm Beach County is on the upswing. Last year, Miami-Dade had 162 deaths -- 35 fewer than in Palm Beach County.

Overall, there were 1,943 cocaine-related deaths in Florida last year. That's about 26 percent of the 7,573 drug-related deaths medical examiners reported.

Palm Beach County topped the state list for other drug-related deaths: oxycodone (89), methadone (124) and morphine (91).

The county was second in deaths involving the anti-anxiety drug Xanax. Palm Beach had 127 related deaths and Broward County had 128, the report said.

"Obviously, we're upset," said Karen Perry of the Narcotic Overdose Prevention & Education Task Force in West Palm Beach. "It's just so available. It is so easy for the kids to get it. They can get it online."

Perry's son, Richard, overdosed on heroin, cocaine and alcohol three years ago at age 21. The addiction started in high school with marijuana. The problem, Perry said, is marijuana isn't seen as a hardcore drug. But it can lead to experimentation with other drugs, she said.

The task force does presentations at middle and high schools to deter students from trying drugs. According to the medical examiners' report, none of the cocaine-related deaths in Palm Beach County involved juveniles. Sixty-six of the deaths were among people ages 26-50 and 10 were among 18- to 25-year-olds.

Among the heroin-related deaths, four involved 18- to 25-year olds and there were none among teenagers.

Administrators at the Advanced Recovery Center in Delray Beach are noticing a trend toward heroin, which, like oxycodone, is an opiate. Heroin is cheaper and easier to get, Director Robert Parkinson said. In the past five years, the center has seen heroin users as young as 16.

That Palm Beach County topped the state for four drugs did not surprise Parkinson. Rehab centers, or sober houses, are prevalent here, attracting addicts from other states.