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## City & Region

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### Overdose fatalities from opiates may double 2014's total

#### Toll from epidemic cited in Erie County

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The opiate epidemic roared into July.

Two addicts fatally overdosed July 1 in Buffalo. The next day, four more people were dead from overdoses.

Now, halfway through this year, Erie County is on a pace to record twice as many opiate deaths as in 2014, when there were 119 fatalities, according to county health officials.

"Fatal opioid overdoses in Erie County continue at a staggering rate," Erie County Health Commissioner Gale R. Burstein said Wednesday.

Addicts are so desperate for more intense highs from heroin that they are demanding more potent doses and their dealers are accommodating them by adding fentanyl, a chemically manufactured opioid often prescribed for cancer patients.

"I believe there is a demand for fentanyl-laced heroin. Addicts think they get a higher high, but unfortunately for the addicts, this leads to numerous overdose deaths," Buffalo Police Commissioner Daniel Derenda said.

The problem is not just in Buffalo, but across Erie County and the rest of the country.

There have been 34 confirmed fatal overdoses across the county so far in 2015. But dozens of suspected drug deaths are awaiting toxicology tests, which can take up to four months because of the growing backlog.

When these suspected opiate overdose fatalities are confirmed, the tally would put the number of deaths on a pace to double last year's total, county health officials said.

When in Buffalo, police believe that at least 42 fatal overdoses have occurred because needles, heroin bags and other paraphernalia were found at death scenes, according to Capt. Joseph A. Gramaglia of the Homicide Squad.

"In a lot of these cases, we are still awaiting final toxicology results," Gramaglia said, "and that number will grow higher once toxicology results are completed from other DOA scenes where heroin paraphernalia was not present."

In Cheektowaga, as of June 30, there were 46 heroin overdoses, seven of them fatal. In all of last year, five people died of opiate overdoses in the town.

"At one residence, we had three overdoses in two days. The first time we went, it was for a young man and we revived him. About an hour and a half later, we went back and revived a young woman," said Cheektowaga Assistant Police Chief James J. Speyer Jr. "The next day, we went back because the young man had overdosed again, and we revived him again."

A summary of the 34 confirmed cases by the county Health Department revealed these statistics:

- 28 of the addicts were white, three black and three Hispanic.
- 23 were men, and 11 were women. The average age among the dead was 38.
- 22 deaths occurred in Buffalo and the rest in the suburbs.

Derenda pointed out that the deaths in the city did not always involve city residents.

"The vast majority of the deaths in the city involved suburban residents who came here to buy drugs and use them while they were here," Derenda said.

Twenty-five confirmed fatal drug overdoses involved fentanyl, according to toxicology tests.

"The biggest problem is, you have users buying from drug dealers, and they may or may not know that there is enough fentanyl in the dose to kill them," Gramaglia said, adding that as little as five grains of fentanyl – each the size of table salt – can prove deadly.

Health officials and police say the number of deaths would be even higher if it were not for the increased use of the opiate antidote Narcan, also known as naloxone, which many first responders are now carrying with them to revive addicts who have overdosed.

But even with this lifesaver, the addiction sometimes overtakes users at a later time.

"We have had a few instances where a person was revived with Narcan, only to overdose again later in the same day and die," Gramaglia said.

Training and education are crucial to saving lives, Burstein said.

"The Erie County Department of Health continues in our leadership role to train first responders and community members, many of whom have family or friends battling opioid addiction, on how to recognize a drug overdose and how to administer the life-saving drug," she said. "By raising community awareness of this emerging public health crisis and through our educational outreach, we hope our combined efforts will save lives to give active opioid users another chance."

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