

Data show opioids' deadly toll

By **Felice J. Freyer** Globe Staff January 21, 2016

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/01/20/people-hardest-hit-opioid-epidemic/iiDQcLSuhOYPzY3t6rYqQI/story.html>

People 25 to 44 years old are hardest hit by the opioid overdose epidemic that has left thousands dead in Massachusetts, according to [new data](#) from the state Department of Public Health.

On Wednesday, the state released for the first time a demographic portrait of the still-growing health crisis, and that report found certain groups bear a disproportionate burden.

The numbers show that overdose deaths in the first nine months of 2015 remained high — higher than the same period the year before, despite policy-makers' focus on combating heroin and prescription painkiller abuse.

Fifty-seven percent of those who died of unintentional overdoses were 25 to 44 years old, even though this age group accounted for only 4 percent of deaths from all causes during that period. Ten percent of overdose deaths were among those younger than 25, while only 1.5 percent of all deaths were among people that young.

Hispanic people are also disproportionately affected. Nine percent of people who died of overdoses were Hispanic, compared with 3 percent of those who died from all causes.



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[Nationally, the number of opioid prescriptions jumped nearly 140 percent between the mid-1990s and 2013.](#)

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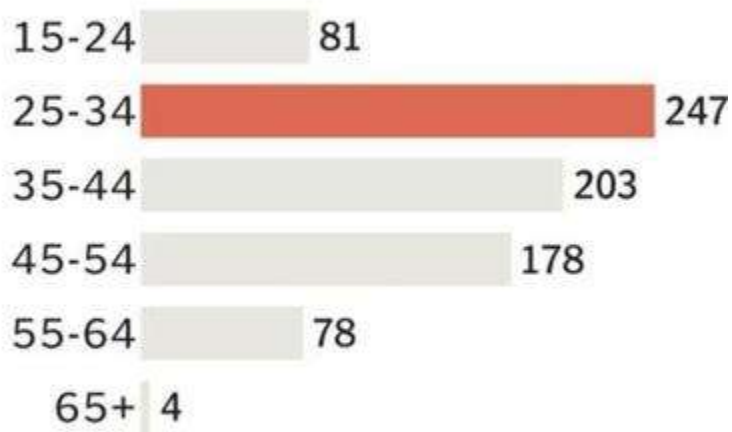
Still, most of those who died from unintentional overdoses — 83 percent — were white non-Hispanic people.

And men were substantially more likely to succumb from powerful drugs: Three-quarters of those who died of unintentional opioid overdoses were men.

Charles J. Faris, president of Spectrum Health Systems, a large provider of addiction-treatment in Massachusetts, said those numbers align with his experience. For unknown reasons, he said, men have always accounted for two-thirds or more of those being treated for substance abuse.

Mass. opioid deaths

By age, Jan.-Sept. 2015:



NOTE: Excludes suicides and unconfirmed cases

SOURCE: Mass. Department of Public Health

And a younger crowd is entering treatment, he said, with large numbers of people 18 to 26 years old. In the past, Faris said, “Typically, our populations were over 30 years old,” he said.

The data in Wednesday’s state report are drawn from death records provided by the medical examiner. The records do not distinguish between heroin and prescription opioids because the

drugs are indistinguishable when broken down in the body, said health department spokesman Scott Zoback.

The latest data show that 1,104 people died from opioid overdoses in the first nine months of 2015, eclipsing the 923 who died in the same period in 2014. The 2015 death data — which include confirmed cases of unintentional overdoses as well as suicides and projections — are preliminary and expected to change as additional information comes in. The demographic data are based on confirmed unintentional cases only.

In June, Governor Charlie Baker's Opioid Working Group released [65 recommendations](#) and an [action plan](#). Among the resulting changes:

- Treatment providers are adding 250 beds.
- The state's database of prescriptions for addictive drugs, useful in detecting overuse, is being improved to make it easier to use, up-to-date, and connected with similar databases in other states.
- The overdose-reversing drug naloxone, widely known by the brand name Narcan, is becoming more widely available through bulk purchasing.

The state also increased payments to residential recovery programs, and the four medical schools in Massachusetts agreed to teach a set of “core competencies” in addiction treatment and painkiller prescribing. Additionally, a 2014 law that requires insurers to cover certain addiction-treatment services without prior authorization went into effect in October, and is expected to ease access to treatment.

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