



OSAM-O-GRAM

DATE: September 23, 2002

DATELINE: Ohio



Wright State University
The University of Akron

Marietta, Ohio, Experiencing Tremendous Increase in Heroin and Opioid-Related Drug Overdoses

In July, 2002, ODADAS requested OSAM scientists to evaluate a recent outbreak of heroin and other opioid abuse in Marietta, Ohio, a small riverfront community of about 15,000 people in Washington County (population about 63,000). To date, several focus groups and individual interviews have been conducted with law enforcement and treatment professionals, local judges, and recovering users.

Although data are currently being analyzed, preliminary findings confirm that Marietta/Washington County has experienced a tremendous increase in heroin and other opioid drug abuse that likely began emerging about two years ago. Law enforcement and treatment personnel estimate about 200 heroin users in the county at any given time--much larger than expected given the population size. The majority of these new heroin and other opioid abusers are young white males, age 18 to 25, and many are from middle to upper income families. Most new heroin users begin by snorting the drug, but many quickly move to injection, thereby increasing their risks of HIV, HBV, and HCV infection.

Drug overdose evidence supports the increase in heroin and other opioid abuse. According to a local substance abuse treatment agency, there were 52 *non-fatal* overdoses related to heroin, other opioids, and sedatives in Washington County between May 2002 and August 2002. Fifteen of these overdoses occurred in a two-week period. In addition, of illicit drug-related deaths between August 2001 and August 2002, 62% involved heroin and the remaining 38% involved other opioids (e.g., Fentanyl, OxyContin, and Percocet) and sedatives. The problem has become so serious that a group of concerned citizens, called 'Turning Point,' was established about a year ago to help mobilize community resources to address the problem.

OSAM has recently reported similar increases in heroin and other opioid abuse in urban centers throughout the State, but such increases in small towns are unprecedented, and they can have devastating impacts for abusers, their families, and the community. Importantly, smaller communities, such as Marietta, are severely challenged to provide the necessary services to address large increases in heroin and other opioid abuse.

Preliminary evidence also suggests similar increases in opioid abuse have begun to emerge in surrounding counties in southeast Ohio, including Athens. Prevention efforts are urgently needed to educate potential new users and the community at large in rural areas of the risks associated with heroin and prescription opioid drug abuse.

OSAM-O-GRAMS report key findings of the Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring (OSAM) Network. Informants located throughout the state use qualitative and quantitative data to provide semiannual monitoring of substance abuse trends. The OSAM Network is funded by the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services by contract to Wright State University and by subcontract to the University of Akron. This OSAM-O-GRAM is based on a special investigation requested by ODADAS prompted by the recent increase in heroin-related overdose deaths reported in the Marietta, Ohio area.

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