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Tri-county cops try to fight heroin trend

More young adults turning to drug, overdosing, officials say

*BY AMBER HUNT
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Ryan Rudolph's lifeless body lay wrapped in a blanket in a vacant lot -- exactly where the anonymous caller had said it would be.

"This is not a joke," the voice said. "We're sorry; there was nothing we could do. Your boy is dead, and you can find his body at ..."

The voice mail message was left on Rudolph's mother's cell phone Oct. 20, 2007.

The 18-year-old had just been released from 68 days in the Macomb County Jail after an arrest for heroin possession.

Rudolph's family had planned to pick him up that day from jail, and from there they were taking him to rehab.

But he had been released a day early because of overcrowding, and apparently some of his party buddies reached him first.

"I look back and ask myself if I did the right things, if we were too hard on him or not hard enough, but I'll never know," said Mark Rudolph, 54, of Fraser.

It's a question that more and more parents are asking as heroin overdoses are on the rise.

Narcotics officers in Macomb, Wayne and Oakland counties all say that in the past year, they have encountered more heroin use on the streets than in years past, especially among people in their teens and 20s.

The trend has a body count: In 2008, 55 people died of heroin-related drug overdoses in Macomb County alone -- the most in a five-year period.

Of those, 12 -- or about 22% -- were between the ages of 18 and 25. In 2004, just 15 people died heroin-related deaths, only one of whom was in that age bracket.

Users get younger

The Free Press analyzed five years of data -- 2004 through 2008 -- from Wayne and Macomb counties. Oakland County officials said they don't keep record of the predominant drug present in drug-related deaths.

The numbers show that 57% of the young adults killed in Macomb County by heroin use were using

heroin alone, meaning they didn't mix it with other drugs or alcohol.

In Wayne County, 157 people died in heroin-related deaths last year.

That's just slightly higher than 2007, but lower overall than the previous three years.

Still, 10.2% of those killed last year were 25 and younger, according to the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office.

While Oakland County couldn't specify its heroin-related deaths, law enforcement officials said they, too, have seen more heroin use in young adults than in recent years.

Lt. Joe Quisenberry of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office said in the past year, he has investigated four overdoses involving young adults. The year before, there were none.

"Heroin was always the dirtier drug in the past," said Macomb County Sheriff's Lt. Joe Guzdziol, who works with the office's drug unit. "It's something you'd hear about old guys doing in the '60s and '70s, and now the kids are gravitating to it more."

Purer, cheaper drug

Law enforcement officials say they're trying to fight back, but it's becoming increasingly difficult as heroin becomes more available -- and in purer form -- than in decades past.

Last winter, in an effort to gauge the severity of the heroin problem, Wayne and Macomb counties launched Operation Smack Down, a three-day enforcement effort that largely targeted Macomb buyers hitting known Detroit drug houses.

Twenty-one search warrants were executed, resulting in 73 felony arrests, 43 misdemeanor arrests, 63 seized vehicles and 47.7 grams of confiscated heroin.

Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel said he was floored.

"You didn't hear about this before," he said. "Crack was the big deal, then all of a sudden this became prominent."

Strangely, the use among young adults seems to stem from an increase in the rise of prescription drug abuse, Guzdziol said.

Users start abusing drugs such as Tylenol 3 and OxyContin, but while the latter costs \$80 a pill, one dose of heroin -- called a bindle -- goes for just \$10.

It's a cheaper and more potent high, he said.

Web site tells story

Few area advocates for families hit with drug problems have been as outspoken as Mark Rudolph, who tells his son's story on a Web site he launched, www.promise2ryan.com, which serves as both a cautionary tale and catharsis.

Ryan Rudolph began with marijuana, then moved on to prescription drugs. Next came cocaine and then heroin.

Mark Rudolph only learned of the progression when Ryan Rudolph described it to a judge in August 2007, after his arrest.

Since his son's death, Mark Rudolph has taken on a personal cause to educate parents about the signs of heroin abuse.

"As long as we don't ignore the problem and we talk about it, and parents and friends know what to look for," he said, "there is hope."

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Additional Facts

How to find help

- **Families Anonymous:** 800-736-9805; www.familiesanonymous.org.
- **Narcotics Anonymous:** 818-773-9999; www.na.org.
- **Save Our Youth -- Royal Oak:** www.ci.royal-oak.mi.us/rosoy.
- **Save Our Youth Task Force -- Livonia:** <http://saveouryouthtaskforce.com>.
- **Families Against Narcotics -- Fraser:** <http://fraser-fan.org>.
- **Teens Using Drugs: What To Know & What To Do:** <http://teensusingdrugs.org>.
- **Parents. The Anti-Drug.:** www.theantidrug.com.
- **The Partnership for a Drug-Free America:** www.drugfree.org.

Source: www.promise2ryan.com
