



## Heroin addiction rising in metro Detroit suburbs

Addictions to opiate-based painkillers such as OxyContin and Vicodin are fueling a growing heroin problem in the suburbs.

Authorities in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties said they have seen increases of up to 50% in the number of people seeking treatment for heroin addiction.

"I can't give you hard numbers, but we know it's here, and we're constantly amazed at how young the users are getting," said Detective Sgt. Deron Myers of the Chesterfield Township Police Department. "Years ago, you'd never fathom a 15-, 16-, 17-year-old using heroin. It was considered an inner-city, Cass Corridor drug."

In Warren, nine people have overdosed on heroin since the fall, prompting the city to assign two undercover police officers to work exclusively on the drug's trafficking and use. Warren police have made 54 arrests in three months for possession, sale or delivery of heroin since fall.

The new heroin addicts likely started off using prescription drugs, authorities said. But as the prescription drugs ran out, they turned to the street, where the drugs cost \$80 a pill. Heroin, on the other hand, is cheap -- as little as \$5 a pop.

"That's what's driven the epidemic over the last two years," said Rick Isaacson, special agent and public information officer for the Detroit division of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

"It's almost as if you're not becoming a heroin addict, per se, you're becoming an opiate addict."

### County officials: In the burbs, heroin is the most-used drug behind alcohol

Sean McGraw thought he had it all: a good job and plenty of money for a house.

Then, at age 23, he had knee surgery. That's when he was introduced to the opiate painkiller Vicodin. He became addicted and eventually graduated to heroin.

"I preferred the pain prescription, but it was getting so expensive," said McGraw, now 35. "I was at the point where I was

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going to kill myself or quit."

McGraw sought treatment and was able to quit.

Today, he's finishing a master's degree in social work and sharing his Roseville home with other recovering addicts.

"I can look back on it with nothing but gratitude because of the life I have today," McGraw said. "But it took me a long time to get to today."

Health agencies in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties say that they have seen an increase in heroin addiction in their treatment facilities, and opiate painkillers such as Vicodin and OxyContin are increasingly at the root of the addiction.

In Macomb County, heroin addiction was 9% to 10% of treatment admissions as recently as three years ago.

Today, that number is closer to half, displacing alcohol as the No. 1 addiction, said Randy O'Brien, director of substance abuse for Macomb County Mental Health.

"Kids are basically getting it from Mom and Dad's medicine cabinets to start," O'Brien said. "Once they get into it for a while, they look for other sources, and it's a lot more expensive out on the street."

"It's a middle-class problem," O'Brien said.

### 'Very trendy' to use

The problem led to Warren adding two

undercover officers to concentrate on heroin.

In Oakland County, heroin addicts have gone from 13% of those admitted for treatment to 23% in the last four years.

There has been an increase in heroin use over the last two years, including one teenage death, said Lt. Thomas Hardesty of the Auburn Hills Police Department.

"It continues to be our second primary drug of choice in our area," after alcohol, said Christina Nicholas, chief of substance-abuse services for Oakland County. "We find that a large portion of prescription drug users seeking treatment were using prescription opiates, and then they move on to heroin."

No definitive numbers were available in Wayne County, but heroin usage is increasing in suburban communities there, as well, trailing only alcohol as the most-used drug.

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"It's very popular and it's very trendy now to use," said Darlene Owens, treatment services manager for the Southeast Michigan Community Alliance. "It's been going up every year."

### Problem hard to track

Heroin addiction is a difficult problem to track because heroin data isn't tracked in any systemic way.

Overdoses don't tell the whole story because some county coroners simply list "drugs" as a cause of death, without specifying what drug.

The Drug Enforcement Administration doesn't even keep user rates, said Rich Isaacson, special agent and public information officer for the Detroit division of the DEA.

Hospital or emergency-room discharge data can be helpful. So can data from public mental health facilities. But none of these will show the number of cases for private treatment or hospitals, and the lack of private data masks the size of the suburban problem.

"The amount of heroin we're seizing is increasing this year and last year," said Lt. Joseph Quisenberry, head of the Drug Task Force at the Oakland County Sheriff's Office.

Oakland County had a handful of deaths in the last few years when teens mixed heroin with fentanyl, Quisenberry said.

"I wish that parents and young people would recognize that heroin and synthetic prescription heroin (such as OxyContin) are extremely dangerous," Quisenberry said. "Almost all the deaths we run into are accidental because people don't realize how dangerous and potent they are."

### Easier to get than pot

The heroin and opiate problem seems to be under the radar for most people, McGraw said.

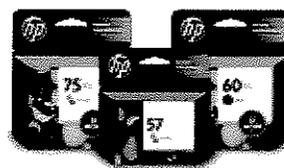
"When I was in high school, there was a tacit rule that as long as you weren't using heroin or crack, you weren't an addict," McGraw said.

"Today that's no longer the case, because heroin is more accessible than marijuana."

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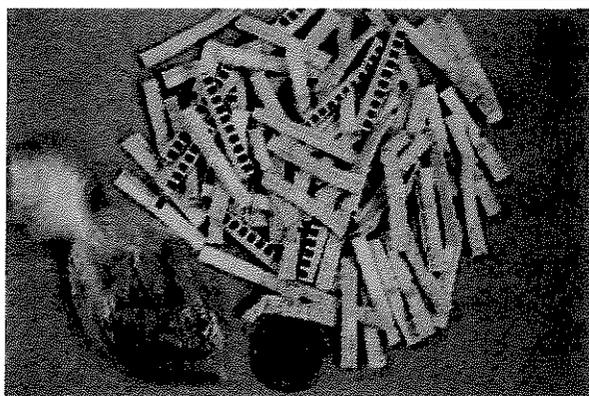
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**Zoom**  
This 2007 Free Press file photo shows packets of heroin wrapped in lottery tickets, and a bundle of heroin laced with fentanyl, ready to be sold on the streets, seized by the Wayne County Sheriff Department. / ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press



**Zoom**  
Enjoying life sober, McGraw, 35, is finishing his master's degree in social work from Wayne State University.



**Zoom**  
Heroin had such a hold on Sean McGraw of Roseville that "I was going to kill myself or quit," he said. He quit and now shares his home with other recovering addicts. In Macomb County, heroin has displaced alcohol as the No. 1 addiction, a county mental health official said. / FEBRUARY PHOTOS BY PATRICIA BECK/DETROIT FREE PRES

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