

Opioid Overdose Deaths Remain High in Seattle and King County



DEA
BULLETIN



Seattle
Field
Division



(U) This DEA Bulletin is based on preliminary reporting and may be subject to updating as additional information becomes available.

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Event

The King County Medical Examiner's (KCME) Office reported that deaths caused by drugs increased to their highest levels in 2016 in both Seattle and King County, Washington. The majority (63 percent) of the 360 deaths were caused by opioids. The opioids responsible for the overdose deaths were opium derivatives such as morphine and heroin, but also included oxycodone, hydrocodone, and methadone. In addition, synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, fentanyl-related compounds, and U-47700 were also found.

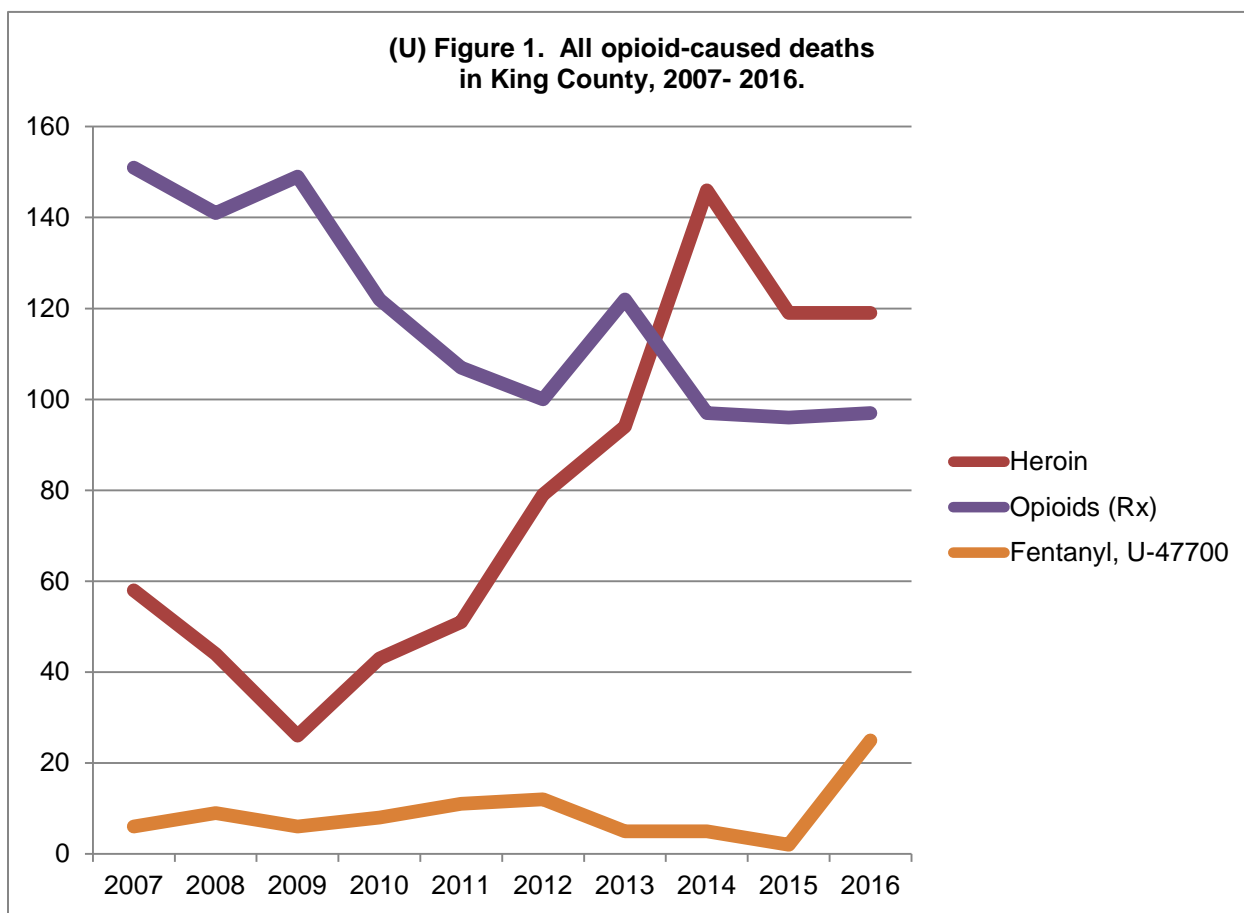
Significance

Overall, deaths caused from all opioids remained, on average, a steady 67 percent of the overall total drug deaths over the past 7 years in Seattle and King County, Washington. Heroin has always held a large share of the drug-caused deaths in Seattle and King County. In 2016, heroin-caused deaths accounted for one-third of the overall drug deaths in the area. Fentanyl, fentanyl-related compounds, and synthetic opioids, such as U-47700, are an increasing concern. Deaths caused by these synthetic opioids have risen to the highest number ever seen in King County in 2016. Pharmaceutical opioid-caused deaths showed no significant change in 2016 but remained high in the area.

The Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Seattle Field Division assesses that drug deaths caused by heroin and synthetic opioids will continue to increase due to opiate addiction in Seattle and King County.

Details

Overall, deaths caused from all opioids—both naturally occurring and synthetic—remained, on average, a steady 67 percent of the overall total drug deaths over the past 7 years in Seattle and King County. Figure 1 shows the deaths caused by heroin, prescription opioids, and fentanyl/U-47700 for the past decade.



Source: King County Medical Examiner data

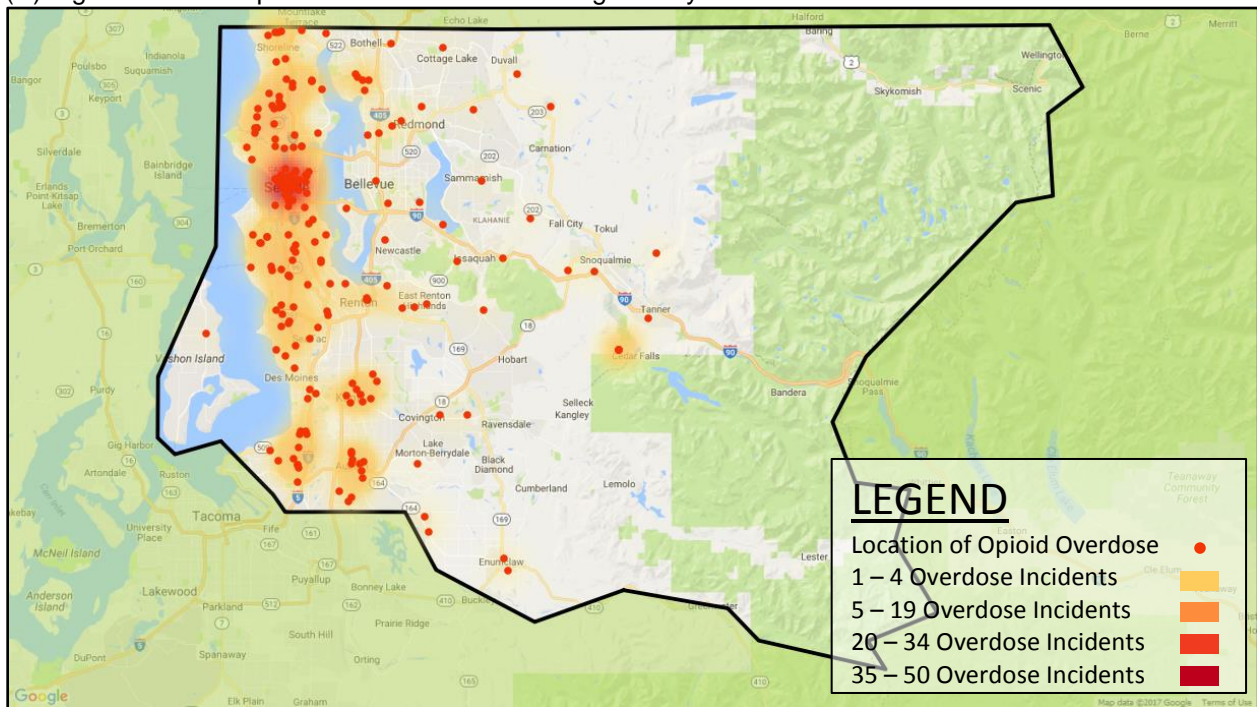
Heroin continues to increase as a drug of abuse in Seattle and King County, Washington. Although heroin deaths have declined somewhat in 2016, heroin was responsible for the highest number of drug-caused deaths—surpassing pharmaceutical opioids in 2014 for the first time in over a decade. Heroin deaths have multiplied along with other problem indicators associated with the drug. Moreover, users are combining heroin and methamphetamine with deaths by this combination increasing substantially to 12 percent of the overall drug death total. Preliminary data for the first quarter of 2017 shows that heroin continues to be the leading cause of drug deaths, accounting for 40 of the 89 drug deaths reported (45 percent). Also for the first quarter of 2017, 18 drug-caused deaths were from a combination of methamphetamine and heroin.

Fentanyl, fentanyl-related compounds, and the synthetic opioid U-47700 are cause for concern for law enforcement authorities, public safety officials, and public health agencies across the community. Fentanyl-related compounds—including acetyl fentanyl and furanyl fentanyl—caused 23 deaths in 2016, while U-47700 caused 2 deaths. These totals are alarmingly higher than recent years and are nearly double the prior peak in 2012 (12 deaths). Preliminary data for the first quarter of 2017 shows that fentanyl-related compounds and U-47700 continue to be a significant cause of overdose drug deaths. Thus far, there have been 6 deaths caused by fentanyl-related compounds and 2 deaths caused by U-47700.

Pharmaceutical opioid-caused deaths showed no significant change for the third straight year in 2016, but remained high in the area. Pharmaceutical opioids have caused approximately 100 deaths per year since 2014. Prescription opioid-involved deaths are at their lowest point in a decade, decreasing by over one-third from their highest number of 151 in 2007. The most common pharmaceutical opioids causing death in 2016 in King County were methadone and oxycodone products, followed by hydromorphone and hydrocodone.

Figure 2 shows hot spots for opioid-caused deaths in King County. As stated previously, a total of 225 (63 percent) of all drug deaths in King County were caused by heroin, prescription opioids, or synthetic opioids.

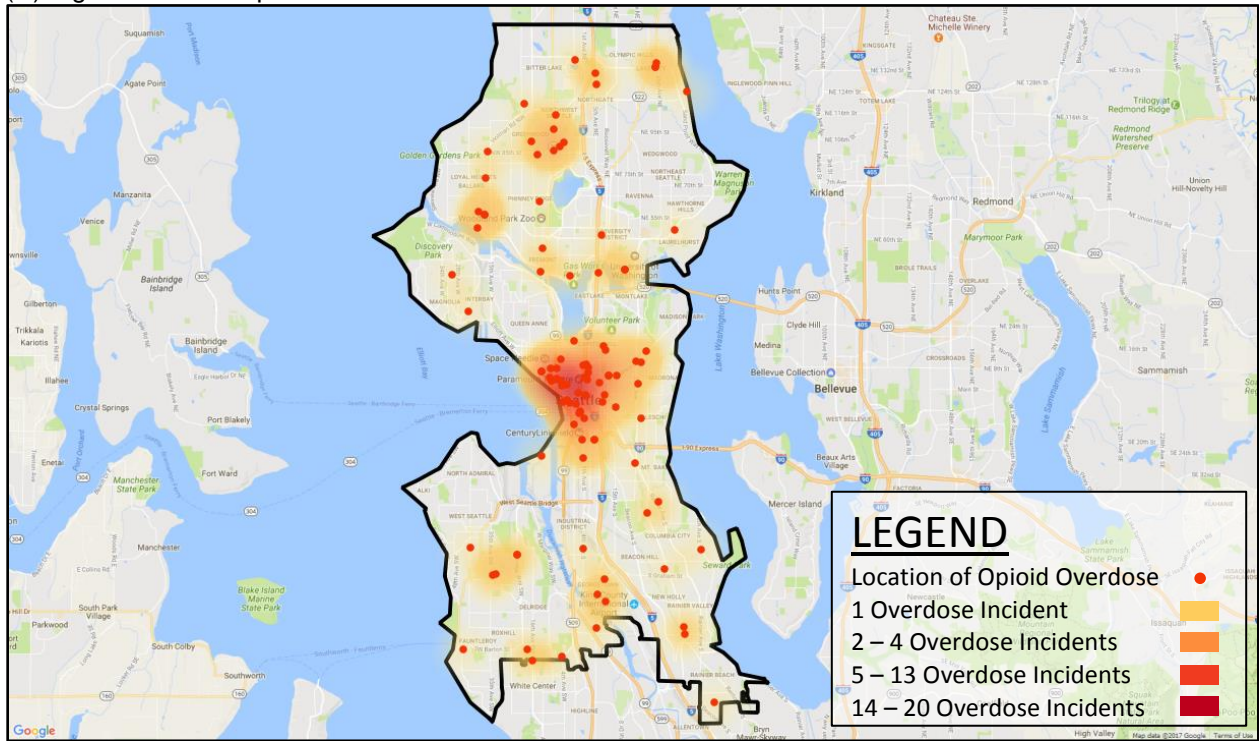
(U) Figure 2. 2016 Opioid overdose deaths in King County.



Source: King County Medical Examiner data

Figure 3 shows hot spots for opioid-caused deaths in Seattle. In 2016, a total of 121 (68 percent) of all drug deaths in Seattle were caused by heroin, prescription opioids, or synthetic opioids. In 2016, 179 (50 percent) of all drug deaths occurred within Seattle. Moreover, Seattle accounted for 54 percent of all opioid deaths in King County. Seattle was distantly followed by the cities of Kent with 13 opioid deaths (6 percent), Auburn with 11 opioid deaths (5 percent), and Federal Way with 10 opioid deaths (4 percent).

(U) Figure 3. 2016 Opioid overdose deaths in Seattle.



Source: King County Medical Examiner data

(U) This product was prepared by the DEA Seattle Field Division. Comments and questions may be addressed to the Chief, Analysis and Production Section at dea.onsi@usdoj.gov. For media/press inquiries call (202) 307-7977.