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Addicted to Heroin, Part 2: APD Calls Overdose Deaths An 'Epidemic'

February 26, 2013 | By Abby Hancock | Channel 2 News

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Heroin overdoses have reached an "epidemic" level, according to the Anchorage Police Department. APD Sgt. Kathy Lacey says heroin use is back in force and heroin-related overdoses are claiming more young lives than traffic fatalities.

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"Heroin has come on stronger and stronger and stronger every year, we're seeing more of it," Sgt. Lacey said. "It is now the drug of choice on the street and we're seeing young people dying from it at an alarming rate."

In 2011, there were 27 opioid-related deaths in Anchorage. Opioid is the term used to describe pain-killing drugs like morphine, oxycodone, and heroin. APD statistics show that in 2012, there were 22 heroin overdose deaths in the city. Heroin investigations are five times more common than cases stemming from other drugs, according to police. Police say the average age of a heroin user who overdoses is 29-years-old.

"It's a young person's drug and I think that's what shocks people," Lacey said. "They don't realize how plentiful it is. It is everywhere. It's not like it's difficult to get. I could walk out of this room and in ten minutes have bought some heroin on the street."

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A woman named Lisa, who would not disclose her last name, says she has used heroin for years. In a February interview, she shared her on-going struggles with addiction, just hours before heading to the Anchorage Jail where she would have to spend at least the next two months behind bars for breaking probation.

She is also on the wait list for the methadone treatment program at the Center For Drug Problems in Anchorage.

"I like the way it makes me feel, you know," Lisa said. "When you're addicted, it's hard to stop because you go through withdrawals and you're sick and it hurts and it's just easy to get a quick fix rather than have to suffer and be in pain."

According to Sgt. Lacey, heroin is cheaper than other opioids like prescription pain pills, however it can be equally addictive. A tenth of a gram of heroin, known as a "nifty", has a street value of about \$50. An ounce runs on average about \$5,000, which drug dealers parcel into fractional units, often mixing it with unknown ingredients to increase their profits.

"You have no idea what they're cutting it with and that's the problem," Sgt. Lacey said. "People have no idea what they're putting into their system, and when you're trusting your drug dealers (with) what you're putting in your system.... that's a dangerous place to be."

Note: This is the second story in a three-part series "Addicted to Heroin." Part 3 will air Wednesday on the Channel 2 Newshour.

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