Update on Drug Overdose Deaths — Alaska, 2016

Background

The national drug overdose death rate has risen considerably in recent years due to the opioid epidemic. In 2015, Alaska’s opioid overdose death rate was higher than the national rate (11.0 vs. 10.4 per 100,000 population, respectively). The purpose of this Bulletin is to provide a 2016 update on drug overdose deaths in Alaska.

Methods

Alaska mortality data were queried to characterize deaths due to drug overdose as defined by the International Classification of Disease, 10th Revision (ICD-10) Codes. This analysis only included in-state Alaska overdose deaths, regardless of the decedents’ residence. Age-adjusted rates were calculated using 2016 Alaska population estimates; population data by race were not available for 2016, so 2015 estimates were used for these calculations. All 2016 numbers and rates are preliminary.

Results

During 2016, 128 drug overdose deaths occurred in Alaska; of these, 95 (74%) involved any type of opioid (including prescription opioids, heroin, and other) and 49 (38%) involved heroin specifically (Table). There were 95 opioid overdose deaths in 2016. In 2015, the number and rate of all drug overdose deaths increased compared to the prior 7 years (Table).

Table. Drug Overdose Deaths by Category — Alaska, 2010–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Deaths per Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prescription Drugs</td>
<td>58–76 (7.8–10.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opioid Pain Relievers</td>
<td>48–52 (6.4–7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illicit Drugs</td>
<td>21–55 (2.8–7.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>3–26 (1.4–3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified Drugs</td>
<td>4–24 (2.0–3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Opioid Overdoses Deaths</td>
<td>76–125 (10.5–17.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Driven primarily by heroin and other illicit drugs, Alaska’s drug overdose death rate increased in 2016. Notable demographic changes in 2016 included higher death rates among a younger age-group (25–34 year-olds) and among Gulf Coast residents.

In 2016, the age-adjusted opioid overdose death rate was the highest since 2009, and represents a fourfold increase since 2005 (Figure). The heroin and other illicit opioid overdose death rates increased over the past year (from 5.2 to 7.9 per 100,000 in 2015 and 2016, respectively; Figure).

In 2016, overdose death rates for males and females were 20.9 and 12.3 per 100,000, respectively. Rates were highest for persons aged 25–34, 35–44, and 45–54 years (30.3, 29.2, and 27.3 deaths per 100,000, respectively). Alaska Native and non-Native people had similar rates of overdose mortality in 2016 (16.6 and 16.1, respectively). Rates by region were highest in the Gulf Coast, followed by Anchorage/MatSul and Southeast (23.7, 18.7, and 16.2 per 100,000 persons, respectively).

Figure. Overdose Deaths by Drug Category — Alaska, 2005–2016

References