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Illinois Church Action on Alcohol & Addiction Problems

Opioid Alert - January 4, 2023



OPIOID DEATHS LIKELY RECORD

The number of opioid deaths in Cook County last year is likely to set a record, possibly reaching over 2,000 once all autopsy tests have been completed, the Cook County medical examiner's office said Tuesday.

The office has already confirmed 1,599 opioid overdose deaths for 2022, and it expects 400 to 500 of its pending cases will also be listed as death by opioid toxicity. In 2021, the county reported a record 1,936 opioid overdoses.

As troubling as those numbers are, University of Illinois Chicago researchers say the county may be seriously undercounting opioid deaths.

A study by the UIC School of Public Health found at least 633 hospital deaths from 2016 to 2019 that met the criteria for opioid overdose yet were not listed as such by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The researchers discovered that fewer than 20% of hospital patients who showed symptoms of opioid overdose were autopsied by the medical examiner's office.

"We're missing somewhere between 6-8% on the low end to as high as 15% of all opioid deaths within Cook County because people are dying within a hospital setting and they don't meet the profile of your typical opioid use disorder individual," said Lee Friedman, an associate professor at UIC who led the study.

"Therefore they're not being sent over to the [medical examiner], who will do the accurate job of cataloguing the death appropriately and filling out the death certificate. And that gets reported to the CDC," he explained.

Friedman said opioid deaths at hospitals typically involve

pharmaceuticals and people who are older or suffer from chronic health conditions.

Still, he acknowledged that fentanyl, 50 times stronger than heroin, is now at the center of the protracted opioid crisis.

In Cook County, the number of deaths involving fentanyl has increased steadily, rising from 96 in 2015 to 1,690 in 2021. The drug now contributes to the vast majority of the county's opioid deaths.

Fentanyl contributed to the death of the youngest opioid overdose victim in the county last year, 12-year-old Joel Watts.

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