

## Dangerous heroin use persists despite efforts to rein it in

### Cocaine also beginning to make comeback

By [Adam Wagner](#)

StarNews Staff

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SOUTHEASTERN N.C. -- Heroin and other opiates continue to impact Southeastern North Carolina, even as health care and law enforcement efforts try to stem the tide, according to the latest-available arrest and overdose data.

"We are seeing continued use, continued dangerous use, meaning that people are putting themselves at risk of overdose on a continued basis," said Kenny House, vice president of clinical services at Coastal Horizons. "We're not seeing an abatement."



A loaded heroin syringe is found in the underbrush of a wooded area. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

Law enforcement data from the past four years indicate that in 2015 the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office, New Hanover County Sheriff's Office and Wilmington Police Department seized more combined heroin than in any year since 2012.

Opiate overdoses slumped slightly in 2014, the latest year for which data are available, with both Brunswick and New Hanover recording their lowest totals since 2010. In Brunswick, 18 people died from opioid overdoses, five of which were attributed to heroin; in New Hanover, 24 people overdosed, 11 of which were caused by heroin.

"We're not seeing a decrease in heroin overdoses. We are seeing a decrease in the amounts that are available, at least with the operations that we've been able to run," said Lt. Steve Lanier, who oversees the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office's vice and narcotics division.

Cocaine, Lanier added, is also beginning to make something of a comeback in recent months, but the roots of that are not yet clear.

"I think everybody recognizes the epidemic nature of the problem with opioid abuse," Sen. Thom Tillis said Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Tillis gave a floor speech supporting the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act, which he co-sponsored. Since then, he said, he's heard from two family friends who thanked him because their sons died of overdoses.

It is widely acknowledged that over-prescription of opioids has led to increased demand for heroin, said Mitch Cunningham, deputy chief of the Wilmington Police Department. The drug has an easier route to American streets than before, he added, because of Mexican cartels' control of northern Mexico.

"You've got a demand," Cunningham said, "and you've got a supply."

A bindle of heroin usually sells for \$12 to \$18 in Wilmington, he added, with proceeds often supporting what police have labeled the city's gang violence.

As for why the drug has hit Southeastern North Carolina, arguably, harder than any other part of the 100-county state, House pointed to history and culture. Southeastern North Carolina has a long history of heroin use, he said, while the drug is also readily available.

Cultural factors also play a role.

"We don't tolerate pain well," House said. "We look for pain relief. And opioids, that's what they are (pain relief)."

This week, the U.S. Senate voted to cloture the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act, a wide-ranging bill that would expand the availability of overdose-reversal drug naloxone, improve prescription drug monitoring services, help treat prisoners who are addicted, and launch an evidence-based treatment and interventions program, along with other measures. Tillis, one of the bill's sponsors, said he expects the bill will be advanced as quickly as "timing and procedures" allow.

"In the year that I've been here," he said, "this is the first bill that I can say, when it goes into place, it'll start saving lives on an immediate basis."

Even though the federal efforts represent progress, the senator acknowledged it needs to happen in conjunction with other efforts.

"We really do need a concerted federal, state and local effort, including law enforcement, to solve this problem," Tillis said.

Robert Childs, executive director of the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition, moved to Wilmington late last year after seeing the scope of the problem. Still, the Port City and its surrounding area aren't alone.

"It's bad all across North Carolina right now," Childs said.

Since Childs moved to Wilmington in October, there have been 314 overdose reversals in Wilmington, he said, most of which are via naloxone.

"I went straight for it," Childs said. "We knew it was really bad, and we knew if we could gain access to a lot of the users and their social networks, we could make an impact really fast."

The organization is also working with area law enforcement to get naloxone in the hands of officers on the street, with WPD expected to be equipped with the overdose-reversal drug later in March and the Leland Police Department receiving training for it next week.

Access to detox, methadone and naloxone is crucial in areas with an opiate problem, Childs added.

"We know," he said, "traditional abstinence-based treatment isn't going to be that successful with opioid-addicted people."

Treating someone with an opioid addiction is a multifaceted approach at providers such as Coastal Horizons, House said. Most addicts need the aid of a medication such as Vivitrol or Suboxone, but only in conjunction with other forms of treatment.

"We don't believe that medication alone is the best course," House said. "We believe in them in conjunction with good counseling, psychiatric mental health services and primary care services. There are a lot of things that make for a successful addiction recovery."

Coastal Horizons offers walk-in assessments Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

*Reporter Adam Wagner can be reached at 910-343-2389 or [Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com](mailto:Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com).*

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