Drug Overdose Fatalities Surpass Motor Vehicle Deaths

Throughout the past 16 years, the list of states with more deaths caused by drug overdoses than motor vehicles has grown from four to 39. In 2010, motor vehicle- and drug-induced deaths in Missouri crossed a deadly intersection — drug deaths exceeded traffic fatalities. Opioid-related deaths account for nearly 70 percent of drug overdose deaths in Missouri.

On Sept. 9, 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law two pieces of landmark legislation to address the nation’s dramatic year-over-year growth in the rate of motor vehicle accidents. Before signing the legislation, Johnson said, “In this century more than 1,500,000 of our fellow citizens have died on our streets and highways; nearly three times as many Americans as we have lost in all our wars.” After a decade of continuous growth, the result was an immediate decline in motor vehicle accident deaths — a trend that continues.

The drug overdose crisis, driven by the ongoing opioid epidemic, is creating a similar public health and safety emergency — drug-induced deaths are driving reduced average life expectancy nationally. In 2016, average life expectancy in the U.S. decreased for the second consecutive year — an unprecedented occurrence for a developed nation. At 77.6 years, life expectancy in Missouri is the 12th lowest in the nation. Drug overdoses killed 63,600 Americans in 2016, a 21 percent increase over the previous year and a 300 percent increase since 1999. With nearly 1,400 drug overdose deaths in 2016, Missouri was

“I’m not prone to dramatic statements, but I think we should be really alarmed. The drug overdose problem is a public health problem, and it needs to be addressed. We need to get a handle on it.”

among the states with a statistically higher overdose death rate than the rest of the country.⁷

Between 2014 and 2016, there were 29 counties in Missouri with more drug overdose deaths than those caused by motor vehicles. These counties account for 70 percent of Missouri’s population, include nine out of the 10 most populous counties, and include Pulaski County, home to many veterans and active service members.

Efforts in the 1960s to reduce the number of motor vehicle fatalities can be instructive in the drug- and opioid-induced death rates. Investments in systemwide safety, product design and delivery, public awareness, prevention and emergency response systems are necessary. Inexpensive tools like a prescription drug monitoring system can act as a signal at an intersection.

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Research available at mhanet.com/opioid-initiative