

Deadly, ultra-pure heroin arrives in United States

Mexican drug smugglers are increasingly peddling a form of ultra-potent heroin that sells for as little as \$10 a bag and is so pure it can kill unsuspecting users instantly, sometimes before they even remove the syringe from their veins.

An Associated Press review of drug overdose data shows that "black tar" heroin - named for its dark, gooey consistency - and other forms of the drug are contributing to a spike in fatal overdoses across the nation and attracting a new generation of users who are caught off guard by its potency.

While no deaths have been reported, Glendale police say they have seen a surge in heroin use among youths - some only in their early teens. Many of them got hooked by free samples distributed by a Los Angeles-based street gang.

"Unfortunately, the primary user of the drug demographically is a person under the age of 24 years old," said Glendale police Sgt. Tom Lorenz. "And that became frighteningly alarming since we started to find kids as young as 12, 13, 14 years old that have been exposed to heroin."

Glendale police say they've seen a tenfold increase in heroin cases - from eight to 80 - over the past five years. And heroin is involved in nearly 50 percent of their drug caseload.

"They tell them, 'Just smoke it. It's just like smoking a cigarette.

It's just like smoking marijuana,'" Lorenz said. Once the kids are hooked, "they've got a customer forever."

The problem was serious enough for Glendale Police Chief Ron De Pompa to address the City Council in March, when he told members heroin use in north Glendale was especially worrisome.

According to local press reports, De Pompa said all drug-related offenses in the Crescenta Valley in January were due to heroin. He also noted that over the past two years, Crescenta Valley High School alone had expelled 24 students and suspended 57 for alleged drug and alcohol use.

Glendale school officials could not be reached Monday for comment.

Nationwide, authorities are concerned that the potency and price of the heroin from Mexico and Colombia could widen the drug's appeal, just as crack did for cocaine decades ago.

The Latin American heroin comes in the form of black tar or brown powder, and it has proven especially popular in rural and suburban areas.

"We found people who snorted it lying face-down with the straw lying next to them," said Patrick O'Neil, coroner in suburban Chicago's Will County, where annual heroin deaths have nearly

tripled - from 10 to 29 - since 2006. "It's so potent that we occasionally find the needle in the arm at the death scene."

Originally associated with rock stars, hippies and inner-city junkies, heroin in the 1970s was usually smuggled from Asia and the Middle East and was around 5percent pure. The rest was "filler" such as sugar, starch, powdered milk, even brick dust. The low potency meant that many users injected the drug to maximize the effect.

But in recent years, Mexican drug dealers have improved the way they process poppies, the brightly colored flowers supplied by drug farmers that provide the raw ingredients for heroin, opium and painkillers such as morphine. Purity levels have increased, and prices have fallen.

Federal agents now commonly find heroin that is 50 percent pure and sometimes as much as 80 percent pure.

The greater potency allows more heroin users to snort the drug or smoke it and still achieve a sustained high - an attractive alternative for teenagers and suburbanites who don't want the HIV risk or the track marks on their arms that come with repeated injections.

"That has opened up heroin to a whole different group of users," said Harry Sommers, the agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Agency office in St. Louis.

To hook new users, dealers are selling heroin cheap - often around \$10 a bag. The new users included Billy Roberts, the 19-year-old son of a retired Chicago police officer. Last September, he slumped over dead of a heroin overdose at a friend's house.

John Roberts had moved his family to Will County when Billy was just entering high school.

"I thought I was moving away from problems like that," Roberts said. "These kids out here are being introduced to real serious drugs, dirt cheap, and they don't know how pure and dangerous they are."

Roberts now speaks to high school and civic groups about the dangers of heroin.

In Glendale, which often ranks among the safest of cities its size, gang members were making the quick drive up Interstate 5 to deliver heroin straight to high school kids.

But Lorenz said a police crackdown has curbed the incursion of heroin dealers into Glendale.

"Now it's pretty well-known among those groups that you cannot come into Glendale or they risk being arrested because we have aggressive enforcement in this particular area," Lorenz said.

"So what we're finding out is that, unfortunately, those who are using the drug are now driving outside the city and other parts of the greater Los Angeles area (to buy heroin)."

At the start of the decade, roughly 2,000 people a year died from heroin overdoses nationwide, according to records kept by the Centers for Disease Control. By 2008, the drug was blamed for at least 3,000 deaths in the 36 states that responded to records requests from the AP. Deaths from 2009 have not yet been compiled.

The AP contacted agencies in all 50 states, as well as officials in the District of Columbia and New York City, including medical examiners, coroners and health departments. The survey showed that heroin deaths rose 18.2 percent from 2007 to 2008, and 20.3 percent from 2006 to 2008.

Law enforcement officials and drug-treatment experts believe those statistics woefully undercount the actual number of deaths. And they fear the problem is getting worse: Seizures of heroin along the U.S.-Mexico border quadrupled from 2008 to 2009, from about 44 pounds (20 kilograms) to more than 190 pounds (86 kilograms).