

Ebel: Overdose Deaths Decline in Ohio—But Rise in Licking County

Joe Ebel, Guest Columnist Published 1:19 p.m. ET Sept. 15, 2019

The Ohio Department of Health recently reported a drop of 22% in the number of fatalities due to unintentional drug overdose in 2018. While that is encouraging news, there were still 3,764 Ohio residents who died due to unintentional drug overdoses last year. Ohioans were more than three times as likely to have died from an overdose than from a motor vehicle accident in 2018.

In Licking County, the number of unintentional overdose deaths of county residents dropped from 41 in 2017, to 40 in 2018 (-2.5%), however, the number of unintentional overdose deaths occurring in the county rose from 35 to 42, a 20% increase.

Relying on statistics to tell the story can be dangerous. Simply reading that the number of deaths dropped by 22% in Ohio delivers a much different message than hearing that the number of overdose deaths rose by 20% in Licking County. The state data reports deaths by the county of residence, and the Licking County Health Department's Overdose Fatality Review Committee tracks deaths that occur within the county. These are both valid statements, and together they help give a better view of the ongoing impact of the opioid epidemic.

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As public health officials, we pride ourselves on making data-informed decisions, tracking disease rates, causes of death, and a myriad of other community health status indicators. Unfortunately, there are limits to relying on statistics.

At the recent FED UP! International Opioid Awareness Day rally held in Newark, we heard stories from those who have lost loved ones to drug overdose. Their stories help remind us that each number is someone's son, daughter, mother, father, brother, sister, husband or wife and that we must do all we can to help people access drug treatment programs, provide support to those in recovery, and continue to do what we can to keep those who are suffering alive until they can enter recovery.

By calling the 2-1-1 Crisis Hotline and Information Center, residents can access the mental health and recovery services available in the area. For more information on drug abuse and overdose prevention programs, including the Project Dawn naloxone distribution program, visit <http://www.lickingcohealth.org/hed/drugs.html>.

Data sources:

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Licking County Health Department

<http://www.lickingcohealth.org/documents/report/2018%20Drug%20Overdose%20Death%20Review.pdf> (<http://www.lickingcohealth.org/documents/report/2018%20Drug%20Overdose%20Death%20Review.pdf>)

Ohio Public Health Information Warehouse (Ohio Department of Health) <http://publicapps.odh.ohio.gov/EDW/DataBrowser/Browse/Mortality> (<http://publicapps.odh.ohio.gov/EDW/DataBrowser/Browse/Mortality>)

Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A

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