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## Chasing the Dragon: The rise of heroin use in Alabama

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BIRMINGHAM, AL (WBRC) - It's been a deadly year for heroin overdoses in Jefferson County. The Jefferson County Coroner's office says so far this year 44 people have died from heroin overdoses and another four people died with heroin as a contributing factor to their death.

That's a record amount of heroin deaths and a dramatic spike from years past. We wanted to know why so we turned to law enforcement, drug treatment facilities and drug addicts to get answers.



Drugs and money confiscated by law enforcement in the fight to stop the growth of heroin use. Source: WBRC video

"The saying is they chase that first high the rest of their life. It never is quite as good as that first high," Dr. Mark Stafford of Bradford Health Services said.

He says the users describe the high from heroin as euphoric, but the fun ends with the first withdrawal and the vicious cycle of addiction begins. The opiate is sold as a powder and these days it's pure, not cut with fillers like sugar or powdered milk. Investigators say that has opened up a new market of users.

"Prior to about a year or two ago, a lot of addicts would crush oxycontin tablets down and inject it, but when the formula changed they are not able to do that anymore, so a lot of those addicts have switched to heroin," Lt. Mark Davis with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office said.

"Also heroin is much more pure now than it was in the past which has kind of opened the market up to a group of people to snort it, where when snorting isn't possible there's a lot of people that aren't ready to stick a needle in their arm yet, but if its available to snort, they'll try it," says Lt. Davis.

Investigators have seen a big rise in heroin possession and heroin trafficking cases.

"I've been working full time narcotics for over ten years now and in the past we might have made two or three heroin cases in a year, now heroin has probably come around 40 percent of our case load," says Lt. Davis.

One dose of heroin is a tenth of a gram and in Jefferson County, investigators say that costs between \$20 and \$25. The problem is that users don't know the purity of what they're getting and too much pure heroin can be lethal. The youngest overdose death in Jefferson County this year was a 17-year-old girl from Hueytown, according to the sheriff's office. Because the drug is highly addictive, it has a tight subculture where many addicts can get lost, especially beginning users.

"Their whole culture becomes the heroin culture," Dr. Stafford said. "They use together, they buy together, they spend time together. And so when you take somebody and you pluck them out of that culture, they're basically young people with no one to rely on or no one to lean on."

So where is it coming from? Investigators say most of the heroin in our area comes from Atlanta and the source country is Mexico. The biggest bust so far this year for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department happened in July right off Highway 280 at the Lakes of Inverness Apartments on Springfield Loop West. Deputies seized 127 grams of heroin with a street value up to \$38,000.

Twenty-six-year-old Michael Bonner and 23-year-old Tishia Bryant were both charged with trafficking heroin. Alabama law mandates a sentence of life in prison without parole for anyone convicted of possessing 56 grams or more.

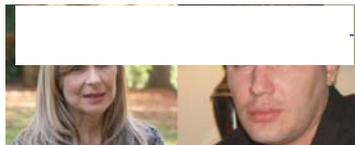
Experts say heroin addicts often become dealers because the deeper they get into the drug, the more desperate they become.

"Once they've depleted their resources, they've still gotta have the drug," Lt. Davis said. "They'll turn to burglary, theft, any crime that will generate the money they need for the drugs they've gotta have."

So just how easy is it to get heroin in Birmingham? We asked a panel of four heroin recovering heroin addicts.

"It's not a phone call anymore it's not. 'Hey you've got this,' it's just a look and then your hands come out and the deal is over with," 26-year-old Jason Alexander said.

Forty-two-year-old David Vinzant was more specific when asked how easy it is to buy heroin.



Pamela Weems (L) spoke out to FOX6 News about her son Brandon's (R) heroin overdose in the hopes that her story would save a life. Source: WBRC video



Beth Shelburne speaks to recovering addicts (L-R): Kim McCain, Jennifer Vinzant, David Vinzant, and Jason Alexander. Source: WBRC video

"It's over at the fairgrounds in downtown and it's also right there in Ross Bridge, I bought it there myself so don't fool yourself to think that it 'aint around cuz its everywhere," he said.

### **Fighting the addiction that 'has many faces'**

Dr. Mark Stafford of Bradford Health Services says heroin addiction affects a huge cross section of society.

"Heroin is the child next door. Heroin is the child in your school that your kids hang out with," Dr. Stafford said. "Heroin is the cheerleader. Heroin is the football player. Heroin is the lacrosse player. Heroin has many faces."

To learn about the many faces of heroin addiction, we sat down with a panel of four recovering heroin addicts at The Village Residential Drug Treatment Facility in Birmingham.

The demographics of the addicts spanned generations. Twenty-six-year-old Jason Alexander is a former football player from Pleasant Grove and 55-year-old Kim McCain is a 30-year drug user. We also interviewed a couple recently married in rehab, Jennifer and David Vinzant.

Three out of four have snorted heroin to get high and all of them have injected heroin to get high and all of them have bought heroin from a dealer. They've also all stolen, been arrested and done things they never imagined to get their hands on the drug.

Alexander describes the moment that led him to rehab.

"Wrecked my car one day, hit another car hit two telephone poles, lost everything. Slept outside for about two weeks until I could get in a place like this," Alexander said.

Thirty-two-year-old Jennifer Vinzant says the worst things she did involved her daughter.

"Stealing from my child and selling her Christmas presents to go get high," she said.

McCain is the most seasoned drug user in the group. He has battled heroin addiction off and on for 30 years.

"Do anything to get it," he said. "And I done about a decade in the penitentiary behind it, because you goin' do what you do to get it."

Forty-two-year-old David Vinzant says he and his now wife decided to go to rehab together.

"We decided one morning when we woke up in a seedy motel on the east side of town," Vinzant said. "And I said let's do it. So we packed up everything, and we showed up at the front door here."

Another common theme got our attention. Before they abused heroin, all four used prescription painkillers to treat pain, both physical and mental.

McCain and David Vinzant both broke their backs in car accidents and Alexander suffered a bad knee injury playing football.

"Prescription pills just wouldn't cover the pain," Alexander said.

Jennifer Vinzant's drug problems started with medicating mental pain.

"I was uncool in high school and wanted to fit in so badly," she said.

Like all other heroin addicts, they were all hooked from day one and because heroin is cheaper than pills and sometimes easier to get, it was an easy sell. People call this "chasing the dragon" because it's not about getting high; it's about avoiding withdrawal. The fun with heroin ends early and a downward spiral quickly begins.

"Once I found the needle that was the only way I wanted to do it that was it," Jennifer Vinzant said. "It was over then. I would sell my soul to the devil if I had to to get it."

Alexander describes his own downward spiral and how he avoided his family.

"You won't go to family functions, you won't go to anything," he said "Because they've seen you high for so long, that if you're straight there, they think something's wrong with you."

Alexander also says an addicts mind plays tricks on itself.

"You know right from wrong, but it's that trick in your mind that says, 'Hey, one time, that's it, I just want to do it one time.' One time is never one time. One time is a million."

Heroin is an extremely difficult drug addiction to break. The withdrawal can be agonizing and cravings can last for years.

David Vinzant describes withdrawal like the flu, but much worse.

"There's no sleep, there's no appetite, there's all kinds of crazy emotions running through your head, anger, you lose your temper really quick," he said. "You want to isolate yourself, stay thirsty, dehydrated all the time. I would describe it as probably the worst sensation mentally and physically you could ever possibly feel."

The group has all experienced loss. Through their addictions they've thrown away houses, careers and relationships, but they are not hopeless. All four have given their lives and struggles over to God and they are hopeful this journey through recovery will be their last.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting help," Alexander said, while the rest of the group nodded in agreement. "That's why so many people stay in addiction for so long. They stay in it for so long because first of all they don't want to fight the sickness and second of all they're scared to ask for help."

The Jefferson County Coroner's office says 44 people have died so far this year from heroin overdoses. The mother of one of those people is speaking out about her son's ordeal. Pamela Weems says her 30-year-old son Brandon was a friend to many people.

"Everyone loved him, he had a contagious smile, children just flocked to Brandon Weems died in April from a heroin overdose. He was one of 11 people to die that month in the most lethal spike of heroin cases in Jefferson County history. Pamela Weems says even though her son struggled with drugs and alcohol since he was 12-years-old, she does not he meant to kill himself that night in April.

"He had already had the coffee made for the next morning and his church clothes laid out the night before, so he was not intending to do it," Weems says. "It was a spur of the moment decision. He had several traumatic events happen three months out of rehab and he didn't know how to handle it without self medicating."

Dr. Mark Stafford at Bradford Health Services says he sees the pattern of self medicating often with patients. He says heroin destroys self esteem and arrests emotional development so young people who use it never learn to handle the problems of daily living.

"If you never learn to solve the problems and you see life as difficult and I want to run away into heroin, you never grow up," says Dr. Stafford.

Brandon Weems had been in and out of rehab and jail and twice before had close calls with heroin. Both times his mom Pamela, a registered nurse who had once worked in drug rehab, found him passed out and called paramedics who were able to revive him.

"I pleaded with him not to ever try that drug again," says Weems. "I think he thought because he survived the first two times that he was infallible and it wouldn't hurt him."

The night he died, Brandon was at the home he shared with his mom, hanging out with a friend. That so-called friend woke Pamela at 4am, telling her they had shot up heroin and Brandon was unresponsive. Pamela describes what happened next.

"I told her immediately to call 911 and we turned him over and he had already started to turn blue," she says. "He was clammy, on the cool side and there was no heartbeat, so I immediately started CPR. When the medics got there they resumed CPR, they tried I think it was three doses of narkian IV and it didn't pull him out this time. Then I heard the defibrillators going off. And then there was silence."

Brandon had died. It turns out the heroin he used that night was pure and not cut with any fillers. Experts say that's the most dangerous part of this heroin trend; users have no idea the purity of what they're getting, so a small dose of high grade heroin can overwhelm even a seasoned drug user.

Dr. Stafford explains what happens to the body.

"You get so much depression of the brain and then the respiratory center is shut down," he says. "Patients basically stop breathing. Once they stop breathing their carbon dioxide levels rise, their acid levels rise in their blood and they go into cardiac arrest. And that's how they die."

Pamela Weems is trying to spread the word about the dangers of heroin.

"I'd like to make sense of it by trying to reach out to other parents and children, young adults," she says. "Life is short. And we can't take chances and it's an unnecessary risk. And I would just encourage anyone that knows of someone who's going through it to reach out. Get help."

She also has a message to everyone about addiction.

"These people are human, they're hurting, they have emotions, and the last thing they need is to have people to condemn them, they need help."

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