

PROJECT ECHO: OD-FIT

Overdose Fatality Investigation Techniques

The Intersection of Death Investigations and Overdose Prevention: Why Data Matter

Reporting accurate data collection is extremely important for overdose prevention work and addressing health disparities. The CDC's State Unintentional Drug Overdose System (SUDORS) data inform efforts to address geographic and demographic disparities in overdose fatalities. Enhancing understanding of these disparities can better inform local and regional overdose prevention and intervention initiatives. This is evident with xylazine, a non-opioid tranquilizer that has been detected in a growing number of overdoses. Initiating comprehensive data collection methods has allowed the Connecticut Department of Health to raise awareness of the increasing concern and strengthen prevention efforts.

Relevant Terminology

- **State Unintentional Drug Overdose System (SUDORS):** Presents comprehensive information on the characteristics and circumstances surrounding drug overdose deaths to inform prevention and response efforts.
- **National Vital Statistics System (NVSS):** Provides the most complete data for births and deaths in the United States.
- **Surveillance:** The ongoing systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of health-related data essential to planning, implementation, and evaluation of interventions.
- **Xylazine:** A non-opioid veterinary tranquilizer not approved for human use that has been linked to an increasing number of overdose deaths nationwide in the evolving drug use and overdose crisis.

Key Takeaways

- SUDORS combines multiple data sources to aggregate data on accidental and undetermined drug overdose deaths. It offers the advantage of looking at circumstances surrounding drug overdose deaths. This information can aid in informing overdose prevention and response efforts, as well as allocating resources and identifying dangerous new substances.
- The CDC's recent publication using SUDORS' data from 25 states and the District of Columbia provides an in-depth picture of overdose disparities. From 2019 to 2020, disproportionate increases in drug overdose deaths occurred among Black and American Indian/Alaskan persons. Also, as county-level income inequality increased, drug overdose fatality rates also increased, particularly for Black individuals. Future prevention efforts must utilize evidence-based, culturally responsive strategies to address these health inequities.
- Collecting data can be difficult on top of other work responsibilities. Some tips for handling data are to automate, participate, and educate. Automating case management systems so that data is automatically pulled on a regular basis, having critical discussions where important

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information can be shared, and educating local and state health departments on needs, are essential steps to move data to action.

- The prevalence of xylazine, primarily in combination with fentanyl, has increased in recent years. Collecting robust data on xylazine’s presence and use has allowed the Connecticut Department of Health to disseminate results to local health departments and hospitals to raise awareness of the issue and enhance harm-reduction efforts.

To learn more about the intersection of death investigations and overdose prevention, check out the session recording and slides or email odfitecho@astho.org for more information.

About the Presenter: Dr. Mbabazi Kariisa is a Health Scientist in the Division of Overdose Prevention in CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) and serves as a science officer focusing on mortality-related activities for CDC’s Overdose Data to Action program. Her work focuses mainly on drug overdose death surveillance and analysis of data from the State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS). Prior to joining NCIPC, she worked as an injury epidemiologist for the Ohio Department of Health in Columbus, Ohio where she worked on an array of injury-related topics. Dr. Kariisa received her Ph.D. in Epidemiology from The Ohio State University and an MPH in International Health from the University of Michigan.



About the Presenter: Kim Miller is an epidemiologist in the Division of Overdose Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She serves as a science officer for the mortality surveillance strategy within the Overdose Data to Action (OD2A) program and provides technical assistance to states participating in the State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS). Prior to joining the CDC, Kim was a scientist at the American Cancer Society, where her research focused on cancer surveillance in adolescents and young adults. Kim holds an MPH in epidemiology from the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University.



About the Presenter: Alfarena (Alfie) McGinty is currently the Chief Deputy Coroner at the Marion County Coroner’s Office in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is an Indiana-certified Medicolegal Death Investigator and has worked at the Marion County Coroner’s Office for over 24 years. She is the first African American female appointed as Chief Deputy Coroner in Marion County and has served for 16 years. She oversees over 4,000 death investigations annually, coordinates training, and education for the staff, and develops agency work policies and procedures.



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About the Presenter: Thomas Gilson, MD, is the chief medical examiner and Crime Laboratory Director of Cuyahoga County, located in Metropolitan Cleveland. Before assuming this position in 2011, Gilson served as a chief medical examiner in Rhode Island. He is board-certified in Forensic Pathology and has over 25 years of experience as a practicing medical examiner. Gilson was awarded a Medical Doctor's degree from The Medical College of Pennsylvania and served as a residency in anatomic and clinical pathology at the University of Cincinnati Pathology. He received his forensic training during a Fellowship with the Medical Examiner of New York City. Gilson's academic interests include the opioid crisis in the United States and the interface of forensic medicine with public health.



About the Presenter: Dr. Shobha Thangada, Ph.D., is an Epidemiologist at the Injury and Violence Prevention Unit, Connecticut Department of Public Health. Dr. Thangada has 20+ years of experience in teaching and research at UCONN Health, affiliated with the University of Connecticut, and has published many research papers in her career. About six years ago Dr. Thangada joined the Connecticut Department of Public Health where she is involved with fatal and nonfatal drug overdose data analysis for the CDC funded 'Overdose Data to Action (OD2A)' grant. Shobha also serves as a primary data coordinator managing the data and closeout processes, as well as managing project deadlines and deliverables.



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