

Drug-Related Deaths in the Elderly: A Five-Year Review of Western Michigan

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INTRODUCTION

- In 2023, 2,646 deaths of older adults aged 65 years and over were reported to the Medical Examiner's Office at Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine. This represents 58.9% of the deaths reported to the office, which serves 13 counties throughout western Michigan.
- Elderly Americans are not typically associated with drug overdoses; this presentation will demonstrate that this population is not immune to drug-related fatalities

METHODS

- An advanced search was performed within the web-based database of deaths reported to the Medical Examiner.
- This search included all deaths of adults aged 60 years and older reported between January 2019 and December 2023 in which a drug, substance or poison was listed as contributory to death.

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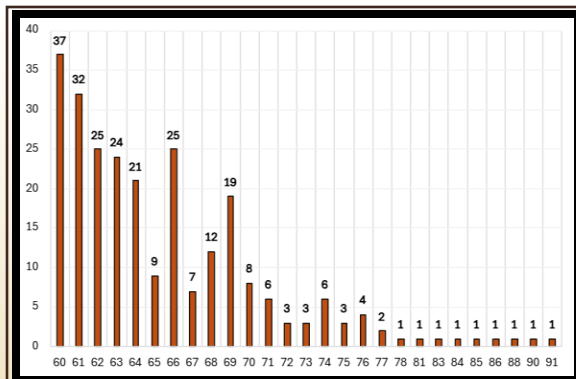


Figure 1: Distribution of age among the 255 cases identified. 45.5% of cases are between the ages of 60 and 65 years.

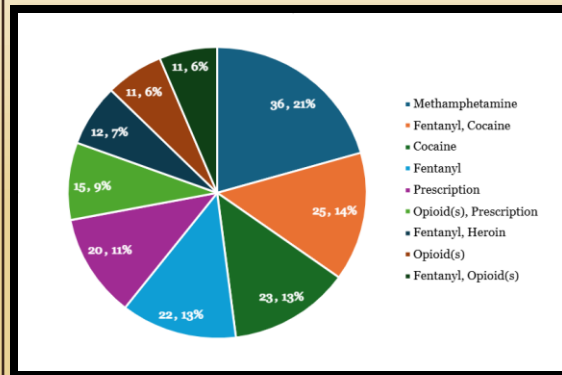


Figure 2: Most common substance types listed as contributory to death. Shown substances only include those that occurred more than 10 times for readability purposes.

RESULTS

- 301 cases were initially identified, with 255 cases of adults aged 60+ years confirmed to be drug-related
- 46 cases were excluded due to non-natural contributors
- 116 (45.5%) were between 60 and 65 years
- Accidental deaths accounted for 84.7% of these cases; deaths by suicide accounted for 13.3%
- 64% involved one or more opioid; over 47% of deaths by suicide involved a least one opioid
- Methamphetamine contributed to 25.5% of these deaths
- From 2019 to 2023, this age group represented 15.6% of all (1,629) drug-related deaths reported to the Medical Examiner's Office.

CONCLUSION

- Forensic pathologists run the risk of missing intentional or unintentional drug-related deaths that require full autopsies and comprehensive postmortem toxicological examinations without thorough medicolegal death investigations.
- This investigation can inform healthcare and community partners in the implementation of unique overdose prevention strategies for this vulnerable population.