

## County heroin use on the rise

Jeremy Duda - DAILY HERALD

The high rate of prescription painkiller abuse in Utah is well documented, and was even chronicled in the recent movie "Happy Valley." But police and drug-abuse counselors say painkiller abuse is the driving force behind a new trend in Utah County -- heroin.

On Wednesday, Sandy and West Jordan police arrested six people with about 1,000 balloons of heroin and cocaine. Police said about 80 percent of the drugs were slated for transport to Utah County.

Heroin use is on the rise in Utah County, following hot on the heels of popular painkillers such as OxyContin and Percocet. According to Lt. Phil Murphy, of the Utah County Major Crimes Task Force, some painkiller addicts may turn to heroin when access to their drugs of choice becomes scarce, and end up addicted to both.

As a powerful, opium-based narcotic, heroin can give people many of the same feelings they get with painkillers such as Oxycontin, but at a cheaper price. Murphy said heroin is often sold by the quarter-gram in balloons known as spitters. While a single pill of Oxycontin may cost between \$60 and \$80, an addict looking for a cheaper fix can buy a spitter for \$10 or \$15.

"Heroin's become a more-mainstream drug for a lot of people, and there's a direct correlation with heroin use and abuse, along with the prescription-pill abuse problem in Utah. It's hand-in-hand," Murphy said. "A lot of our heroin users are pill poppers, and vice versa."

Tim Adams has seen that trend firsthand at the Gathering Place, an addiction treatment center in Orem. Adams, the center's director, began working at the Gathering Place in 2000, and has seen the number of clients who are being treated for heroin addiction rise steadily.

The Gathering Place gets about 500 clients a year. In 2000, only 5-10 percent were seeking treatment for heroin addiction, Adams said. In the past year, that number is about 20-30 percent.

"Heroin will do a lot of the same things as Oxycontin, so they'll go to heroin because heroin prices have gotten cheaper," Adams said. "It's one of the most addictive drugs in the market, and extremely difficult for people to get off it."

Heroin use is still less widespread in Utah County than methamphetamine, a problem that has received significant attention in the past several years. But Adams said heroin is much deadlier, and leads to many more overdoses. Murphy said some pill users are not prepared to make the jump from painkillers to heroin and don't know how much heroin their bodies can handle, leading to accidental overdoses.

According to Dr. Todd Grey at the Utah Office of the Medical Examiner, there were 522 certified drug overdose deaths in Utah in 2007. Of those, 76 were in Utah County. Eleven of Utah County's overdose deaths were due to heroin, Grey said, either alone or in combination with other drugs such as cocaine.

Grey said heroin overdoses have not risen in recent years nearly as much as deaths from prescription pills. Only 130 or so of Utah's 2007 overdose deaths were from illegal drugs, he said. The rest were from prescription drugs.

"If you took away my illicit drug deaths, the impact on how much work we do wouldn't be anywhere near as much as if you took away our prescription-drug overdose deaths," Grey said.

Heroin may not be as big a problem in Utah County as prescription painkiller abuse, but the county's law-enforcement agencies are still working to crack down on the growing trend. The problem, Murphy said, is that heroin is usually only transported to Utah County in relatively small amounts. The larger stashes are generally found in Salt Lake City.

Distributors may keep pounds in Salt Lake City, but runners will often only take about 200 balloons at a time down to Utah County. Police say most of the heroine seized in the arrests in Salt Lake County on Wednesday was meant to go to Utah Valley.

"That's a really good arrest, but that could be a daily operation for somebody. That's somebody that is very well established," Murphy said.

And there's plenty more where that came from, both the drugs and the runners. Murphy said the runners are often illegal immigrants who can be rotated back and forth between several states. They are recruited for their lack of ties to the community, and when they are arrested or deported, there is always someone who can be rotated in.

"It's not difficult for us to go out and find these guys. Obviously our intent is to try to find out where the heroin is coming from in large quantities and cut off the source," Murphy said.

The larger distributors are usually well-insulated from the runners, meaning that even when police catch someone with several ounces of heroin, the runner can't point them toward his supplier. This requires a lot of cooperation between local, state and federal law enforcement.

The Utah County Major Crimes Task Force works closely with the Salt Lake County Metro Narcotics Task Force, which includes officers from across the Salt Lake City area, as well as the federal Drug Enforcement Agency. The two task forces, as well as others from across the state, sometimes work together on cases and frequently exchange information.

Michael Root, a supervisory special agent with the Salt Lake task force, said his group has an agent who serves as a liaison to its counterpart in Utah County. Both also work closely with the United States Attorney's Office in cases where distributors

can be prosecuted at the federal level. Federal convictions bring harsher mandatory sentences than state courts, and there is no parole in the federal prison system.

"Salt Lake's a hub city. [Heroin] is going to come up through Mexico or out from California or whatever and it's going to come to a major city," Root said. "You want to go after the highest-level trafficker you can, and it might not be the guy selling the balloon down in Utah County. It might be the bigger seller in Salt Lake, even though they still affect the same people in the long run."