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Heroin addiction is on the rise in New York State

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Heroin addiction in New York, which ravaged city neighborhoods in the 1970s, has been creeping up again, officials said.

The growing abuse of heroin, an opiate, parallels the fast-rising abuse of similar prescription painkillers, such as OxyContin.

"Heroin abuse in the region has increased, encompassing a growing abuser population that includes a rising number of younger users," according to the National Drug Intelligence Center's 2008 National Drug Threat Assessment.

Further evidence can be found in the growing number of heroin seizures in the city. The center reports that 233 kilograms of heroin were seized here in 2006, more than twice the amount in 2004. During 2005 and 2006, there were 243 seizures at Kennedy and LaGuardia airports -- primary smuggling points -- that captured 634.6 kilograms of heroin.

"It's a significant concern to us in law enforcement that we have seen an increase in the amount of heroin that is being smuggled into the New York area," said John Gilbride, a special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's New York office. "What used to be an anomaly, and is now the norm, are large seizures of heroin."

Besides being available, and cheap at \$5 to \$12 a bag, heroin in New York is the purest in the country, helping to explain its growth in use. The high purity means that the opiate can be snorted, making it more accessible, and less fearsome, than injecting the drug.

Treatment admissions for heroin addiction outnumber all other drugs in the New York area, according to the NDIC. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA, saw heroin users more than double nationally from 136,000 in 2005 to 338,000 in 2006, the most recent date available.

Abuse of prescription opiates like Vicodin and OxyContin has been notoriously rising for a number of years, but seems to be reaching a critical mass, some experts said.

"We're in the fourth biggest epidemic of opiate addiction in the last 100 years," said Dr. Stephen Ross, director of the substance abuse division at NYU/Bellevue Hospital. The last era of such extensive opiate addiction was in the 1960s and 1970s, when heroin ravaged impoverished neighborhoods.

The current epidemic is reminiscent of periods around the turn of the last century. Ross sees more women than men coming in for help with addiction to prescription painkillers and they're usually white, and middle class.

In 2007, for the first time ever, more people used prescription opiates nonmedically for the first time than smoked marijuana for the first time.

"That has been alarming," Ross said.

SAMHSA reports 5.2 million people abused prescription pain relievers in 2006, up from an estimated 4.7 million in 2005.

One of the problems is a shortage of treatment options, Ross said. A less addictive alternative to methadone is buprenorphine, but "there's just not enough buprenorphine providers," Ross said.

Usually, prescription drug and heroin users occupy two different worlds, but not always.

"You'll see this in Wall Street guys who are snorting heroin as a way to calm down," Ross said.

And the drugs after all are nearly identical once metabolized. "Opiates are some of the best anti-anxiety medications known to man," Ross said.

"When they didn't have the money for the pain pills that's when they turned to heroin," said Dr. Alex Horowitz, an addiction specialist, who works at Bellevue Hospital's methadone clinic and in private practice in midtown. He was describing the crossover motivation of some of his patients.

An economic recession is cause for worry. It's a rule of thumb that drug abuse increases as the economy slumps, law enforcement officials and treatment experts said.

"It's like the tide, you know the tide's going to come back in eventually," said Brett Fiala, a spokesman for Daytop Village, a treatment center. "It's going to happen again."