

HIV spike in Lowell addicts higher than first reported

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An alarming spike in HIV cases among addicts clustered in Lowell and Lawrence is even higher than health officials first feared.

And they worry Boston could be next with more drug users sharing dirty needles as the opioid epidemic grows.

A state Department of Public Health report released Wednesday shows an outbreak of HIV cases in the Merrimack Valley cities and surrounding communities.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention assisted in the study that uncovered 129 intravenous drug users with HIV in the Lowell-Lawrence area since 2015 -- 33 percent greater than the statistics tallied by health officials last spring.

That's up from 11 cases in the same area in 2014, said Kevin Cranston, DPH assistant commissioner and director of the Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences.

Lowell health officials and those at the Lowell Community Health Center were unavailable for comment Wednesday night. But back in April, officials said that many of the new cases in Lowell have occurred among users of injected drugs such as heroin. As a bloodborne virus, HIV can be easily transmitted through contaminated syringes, which have become a more common presence during the opioid crisis.

"Reusing needles any time carries a risk of HIV," Judy Lethbridge, quality coordinator at the Lowell Community Health Center, said at that time. "With fentanyl, we're told people are using multiple times a day. They need to get that fix, they pick them up off the street, they don't know who's used them previously. It's the addiction, unfortunately, that's driving it."

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, can lead to AIDS, a potentially fatal disease, if left untreated.

"The potential is there for this to occur in other regions, including Boston," Cranston said. "It's an additional impact of the opioid crisis."

Cranston said he's been in "lockstep" with the Boston Public Health Commission on the outbreak and "all its implications."

While overdoses remain a major concern of the opioid crisis, the HIV outbreak is seen as an urgent threat among public health providers, Cranston told the Herald Wednesday night.

"We need to take the opioid epidemic seriously," he added, "and it warrants heightened vigilance."

The report calls for needle exchanges -- which have been started in Lowell and Lawrence -- along with more HIV testing, treatment and education, in addition to Narcan to reverse overdoses.

"We've been worried a lot about opioids and knew something like this was going to happen at some point," said Dr. Peter Chai, medical toxicologist at the Department of Emergency Medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

"There is no magic drug to solve this. It comes down to promoting access to care and HIV testing," said Chai, who also does research with Boston's HIV AIDS population. "The real way to contain this is to get at the core problem of substance abuse, from mental health, trauma to homelessness."

And while the number of drug overdoses is up dramatically in Boston, officials say they have not yet detected a significant increase of HIV cases caused by intravenous drug use in Boston.

In Boston and the state, HIV AIDS cases had been on the decrease, making the spike in Lowell and Lawrence a red flag for the state's disease trackers.

"We have a new generation of users," said the DPH's Cranston, saying they shoot up "five to 10 times a day with fentanyl!" exposing themselves to dirty needles and all the other paraphernalia that goes with high-risk intravenous drug use.

Some material from The Sun's archives was used in this report.

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