Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Characteristics of Fatal Poisonings Among Infants and Young Children in the United States

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Fatal poisoning is a preventable cause of death among young children. Understanding factors surrounding these deaths will inform future prevention efforts. Our objective was to describe the characteristics of fatal pediatric poisonings using child death review data. We acquired data from 40 states participating in the National Fatality Review-Case Reporting System on deaths attributed to poisonings among children aged ?5 years from 2005 to 2018. We analyzed select demographic, supervisor, death investigation, and substance-related variables using descriptive statistics. During the study period, 731 poisoning-related fatalities were reported by child death reviews to the National Fatality Review-Case Reporting System. Over two-fifths (42.1%, 308 of 731) occurred among infants aged <1 year, and most fatalities (65.1%, 444 of 682) occurred in the child's home. One-sixth of children (97 of 581) had an open child protective services case at time of death. Nearly one-third (32.2%, 203 of 631) of children were supervised by an individual other than the biological parent. Opioids (47.3%, 346 of 731) were the most common substance contributing to death, followed by over-the-counter pain, cold, and allergy medications (14.8%, 108 of 731). Opioids accounted for 24.1% (7 of 29) of the substances contributing to deaths in 2005 compared with 52.2% (24 of 46) in 2018. Opioids were the most common substances contributing to fatal poisonings among young children. Over-the-counter medications continue to account for pediatric fatalities even after regulatory changes. These data highlight the importance of tailored prevention measures to further reduce fatal child poisonings.

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