

## **Overdose deaths projected to surge on the South Shore and statewide.**

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BOSTON – For Rebecca Reilly, getting the prescription painkillers that started her path to heroin addiction was never a problem. “I knew I could walk into a hospital and say my back hurt and get an opiate prescription even though I didn’t need one,” the 21-year-old Quincy resident who is now in recovery said. “I started with prescription opiates and it very quickly led to heroin.”

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overdose deaths is being fueled by easy access to highly addictive prescription painkillers.

"The vast majority of people who end up addicted to heroin started with a legally prescribed pain medication that was provided to them," Baker said during a meeting at Boston Medical Center with state and federal health officials. Four out of five people addicted to heroin first abused prescription drugs, Baker said.

The Department of Public Health projects 88 fatal overdoses in Norfolk County in 2014, a 35 percent increase over 2012, and 85 deaths in Plymouth County, a 57 percent increase over the same period.

Some potential overdose deaths from 2013 and many from 2014 are still under review by the state medical examiner's office.

The data paint a grim picture of the scope of the heroin and prescription drug problem that public officials, police, prosecutors and activists have deemed an epidemic that's sending addicts teeming into jail cells, emergency rooms and morgues.

Statewide, there were 600 confirmed heroin and prescription painkiller overdose deaths in 2014 and the Department of Public Health projects a total of 1,008. That's a 4.2 percent increase over the estimated 967 deaths in 2013 and a 50 percent increase over the 668 confirmed deaths in 2012. In Quincy, preliminary numbers show 25 overdose deaths from January through September of 2014 compared to 23 confirmed deaths for all of 2012 and 26 deaths in 2013. The data show eight overdoses counted so far in Weymouth in 2014 compared to 11 in 2012.

Joanne Peterson, founder of the support group Learn to Cope, said she's noticed an increase in overdose deaths on the South Shore and elsewhere. "We've lost a lot of people," she said. "The last six months has been funeral after funeral after funeral."

She said the increase could be due to heroin mixed with the painkiller fentanyl creating an especially dangerous combination and doctors over-prescribing painkillers.

Baker, who took office in January, has pledged to make combating the state's growing death toll from drugs like heroin and OxyContin a top priority of his administration. In February, he formed an Opioid Working Group that's putting together suggestions for ways to curb the problem.

By Christian Schiavone