



REGISTRY OF VITAL RECORDS AND STATISTICS

Department of Public Health

Case Study: Vital Records Data Guides Action to Reduce Overdose Deaths

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The Massachusetts Registry of Vital Records and Statistics collects and manages millions of vital records, keeping track of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and much more for residents of the Commonwealth. Peter Balvanz of Boston Medical Center is especially interested in the death records, specifically deaths due to drug overdose.

Peter works with Community Data Managers across Massachusetts as part of the HEALing Communities Study to share data and help communities understand and address fatal overdoses. His group has worked with the Registry since 2019, using data to create a dashboard of overdose fatalities in each participating community.

The study calls it data-driven decision-making and it's already showing positive results.

For example, when his team looked at race and ethnicity data regarding drug overdoses in Springfield, Becky Smeltzer, the community's Community Data Manager realized that deaths among Black, Non-Hispanic individuals in the city had recently doubled. The discovery led to a coalition discussion resulting in three interventions specifically for this population at increased risk.

His team also looked at deaths by occupation and what they learned was striking. In participating communities, opioid overdose deaths were concentrated among certain occupations, including those in the fishing, construction, and hospitality industries. He says the occupation data was eye-opening.

"When we first saw the many different demographic data points, we were grateful to be able to use these to start conversations with community coalitions," says Peter. "The state's data gave us what we needed to look at overdoses by age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and location. Knowing who is most affected has enabled communities to devise targeted remedies to try."

The Registry also tracks *where* someone died – at their home, outside, or at another residence, for instance. Tufts University, a HEALing Communities Study partner, uses that data to produce maps to help identify patterns and pinpoint areas of concern. In areas with a concentration of opioid deaths, communities may decide to increase distribution of the overdose-reversal drug Naloxone.

"Communities have only a certain amount of money to address this heartbreaking problem, so data helps to guide action," says Peter. "If you see a high number of deaths near the river, for example, then you can ask community members why, and determine what to do about it. Engaging with the data is critical."

The state's data is guiding action to reduce lives lost to overdose. "When we talk about the data or review a map of fatalities, we are mindful that every point represents a person we lost to opioids, and that person was someone's relative or friend," Peter says. "We never forget that."

Learn more at mass.gov/RVRS