

Poisoning Kills More Than Car Crashes

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In 2008, for the first time in nearly 30 years, more people died of poisoning than in car crashes. Poisoning is now the leading cause of injury death, and 90 percent of poisonings were caused by drugs.

An analysis published last week by the National Center for Health Statistics found that opioid painkillers like morphine, hydrocodone (sold as Vicodin and other brands) and oxycodone (Percocet and other brands) were involved in more than 40 percent of drug poisonings in 2008. These drugs were implicated in more poisoning deaths than heroin or cocaine.

Opioid analgesics accounted for 14,800 of the 36,500 fatal drug poisonings in 2008. About 12,400 people died after taking other kinds of drugs, and for 25 percent of the cases where drugs were listed as a cause of death, no specific drug was mentioned.

There were considerable variations in rates of drug poisoning by age. The rate was highest among 45- to 54-year-olds, and people under 24 had the lowest rates of any group except those over age 65.

Non-Hispanic whites had higher rates of death from drugs than Hispanics, and rates among African-Americans were lower than both.

In 30 states, poisoning is the leading cause of injury death. New Mexico, West Virginia, Alaska, Nevada and Utah have the highest rates in the country.

The lead author of the study, Margaret Warner, a statistician with the federal agency, said that a multifaceted approach to solving the problem was needed, analogous to the various steps taken to improve traffic safety. Equipment improvements and law enforcement have combined to sharply reduce the rate of car crash deaths since 1980.

“The C.D.C. is doing some prevention work,” she said. “The Food and Drug Administration is looking at different regulations they can impose, and the

Office of National Drug Control Policy is not just focusing on interdiction, but using a public health approach as well.”

According to the article, more than five million Americans in 2009-10 reported using pain relievers without a prescription or only for the feeling they caused.