



# Joining the Fight Against the Opioid Epidemic through the Head Start Program in Lowell, MA

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## Introduction

One morning at the Head Start Program in Lowell, Massachusetts, a mother was found unresponsive on the bathroom floor. Following drop off, this mother self-administered a lethal dose of opiates in the Head Start restroom. Thankfully, this mother survived.

Since 2014, fatal overdoses have been increasing, in Lowell (Mass.gov, 2020). As such, a program self-assessment provided enough evidence that the Lowell Head Start needed to offer services to families affected by substance use disorders.

The Lowell Head Start program continues in its efforts to combat the opioid epidemic. To support the Lowell Head Start program, the University of Massachusetts Medical School has forged collaborations with facilities close to Head Start in Lowell by creating informational pamphlets that detail all the services offered to people with substance use disorders in Lowell and nearby towns. To capitalize on the statewide and local efforts to bring opioid addiction out in the open, an educational tool will be created to serve as a resource for families that seek or are referred for services.

The informational tool details the most common signs and symptoms of substance use disorders and it brings to the forelight the most recent scientific advancements regarding treatment of substance use disorders in plain language. Additionally, Lowell Head Start will have forged connections with local community organizations serving those struggling with opioid use disorder.

## What is Head Start?

Head Start, a federally funded program of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, promotes school readiness and family well-being in children from birth to age five who meet specific criteria. The criteria include living at or below the poverty line, living in foster care, being homeless, receiving public assistance, and living with a disability. The Head Start program provides early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services. (Office of Head Start | ACF, 2019).

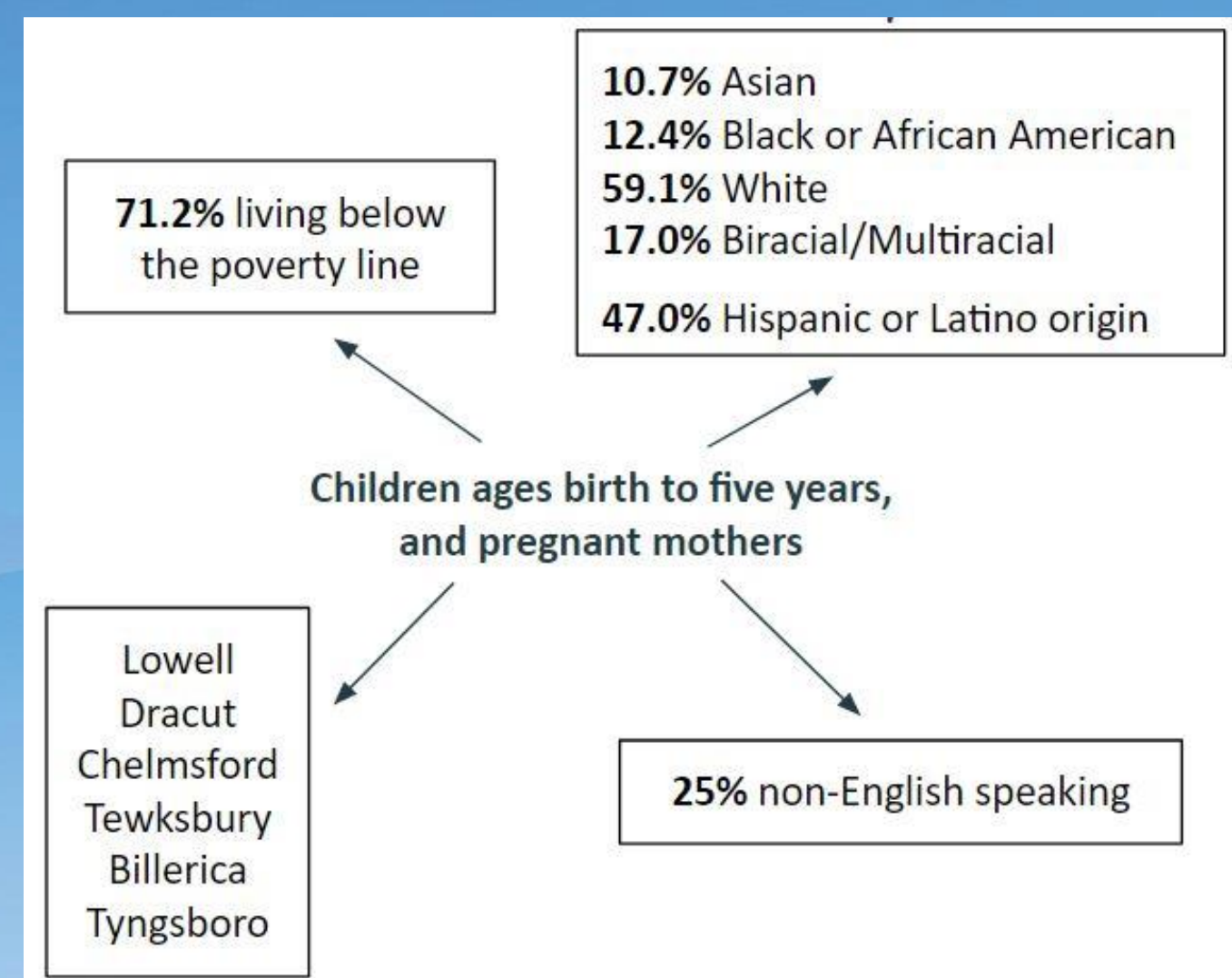


Figure 2: On the left is an image of the Head Start facility located in Lowell, MA. On the right are some statistics of the population represented at Head Start Lowell.

## Objectives

- Gather and analyze available data on opioid use in Lowell, MA and establish evidence-based methods to help decrease opioid use and addiction.
- Educate family members and Head Start staff on the tell-tale signs and symptoms of opioid use to better assist the program in delivering proper, family-centered childcare.
- Provide essential information to families enrolled at Head Start in Lowell who have identified that they are struggling with substance use disorders.
- Establish local connections (rehabilitation centers, hospital programs, clean needle drop-off sites, etc.) to Head Start Lowell that have shown to be effective forms of treatment and recovery

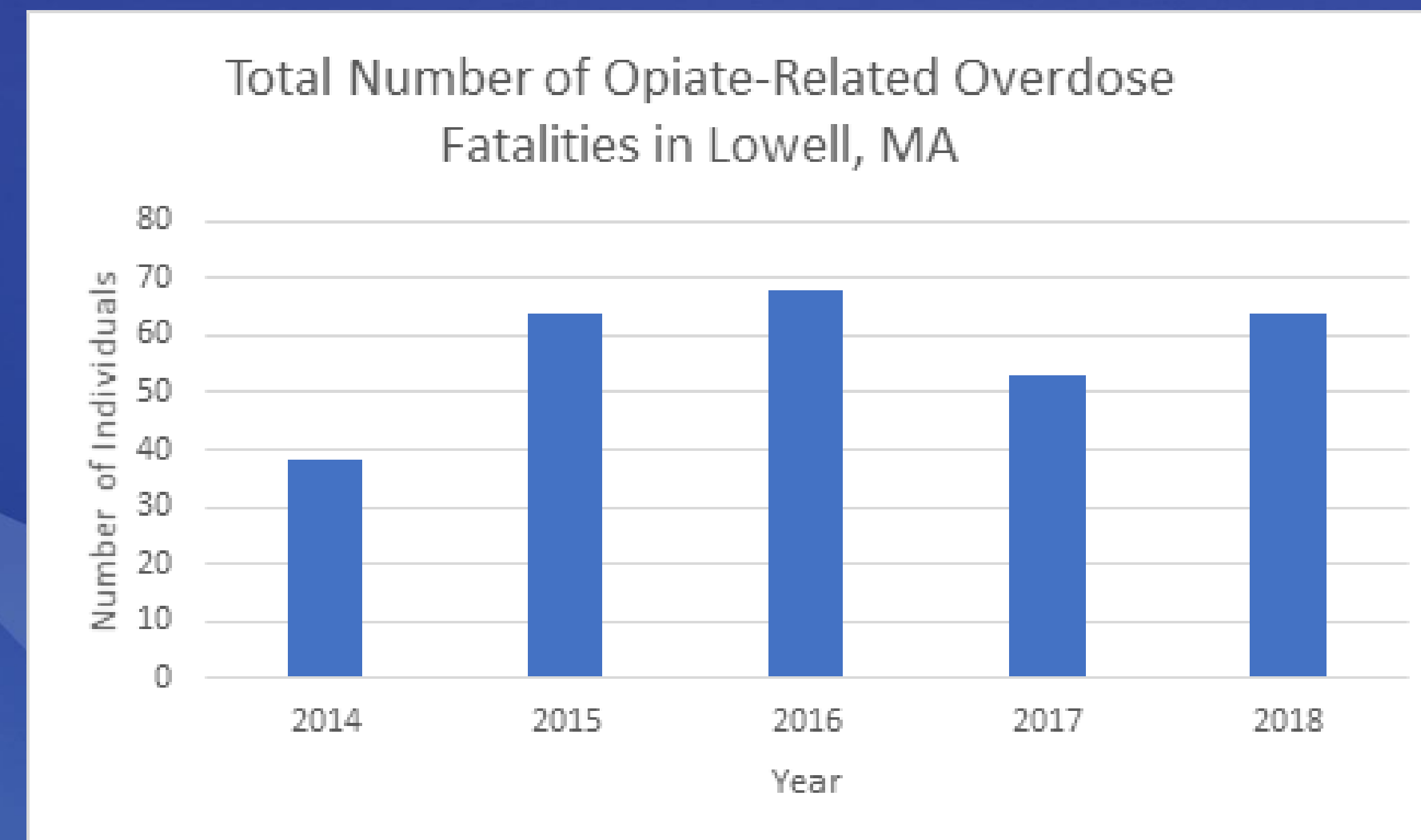


Figure 1: Number of opiate-related fatal overdoses along a five-year period, demonstrating a 68% increase in fatalities in a five-year period.

## Results

The first-time fentanyl was documented in Lowell was on July 20, 2007. Since then, opioid use disorder has become much more commonplace. In 2016, 687 opiate overdose cases occurred with 62 confirmed fatalities, in 2018 the number increased slightly with 64 opioid related deaths. Most overdoses (non-fatal and fatal) occur on the weekends; about 70% of fatal overdoses occur at a private residence (Mass.gov, 2020). In response to these rising numbers, multiple ongoing city-wide measures to control opioid overdoses were created. The city's opioid use taskforce is working on Narcan distribution and training of high-risk populations, promoting safe needle use, developing "weekend preparedness" to encourage preparation for the weekend and educating families and healthcare providers (Lowellma.gov, 2019). The Lowell Police Department is working to develop a Massachusetts Prescription Awareness Tool to help better monitor opioid prescribing throughout the state (Prescription Drug Monitoring Program Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2018). Nationwide, there is a well-supported body of evidence demonstrating effective strategies to combating opioid use including ensuring access to addiction treatment, physicians monitoring of opioid prescribing in the community, treating addiction with medication-assisted therapies, and providing recovery support services and behavioral therapies. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); and Office of the Surgeon General (US)., 2016)

## Conclusion

The opioid epidemic has affected many states, including Massachusetts, across the United States. It is a large undertaking to join the fight against fatal overdoses and opiate addiction and there is a gap to be bridged between those suffering with opioid addiction and the services that are already available to them. With the significant rise in fatal overdoses in the city of Lowell, many departments and programs have been developed to combat the opioid epidemic. This project has revealed a 68% increase in opioid related deaths between 2014 and 2018 (Mass.gov, 2020). This project aims to provide vital information to the Head Start Program and the families they serve, and to provide established resources available in Lowell, such as medication disposals, Narcan and signs of overdose training, needle drop-off services, available hotlines, and city-wide programs, including Lowell Community Opioid Outreach Programs, MA Opioid Abuse and Prevention Collaborative of Greater Lowell, and Partnerships for Success Program. Further steps will focus on distributing the most recent scientific advancements dealing with the substance use disorder into the forelight and simplify that information for the general public. Additionally, we will continue actively forging connections with local community organizations for those currently struggling with opioid use disorder.

## Available Resources

- NARCAN
  - Obtaining Narcan: Lowell Community Health Center at 978-221-6767, Lowell House Addiction Treatment and Recovery at 978-549-8656, Learn to Cope at 508-738-5148, The MA Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline at 800-327-5050
  - Narcan Info: Narcan temporarily reverses the opioid, does not harm anyone when given, comes in a nasal spray form and intramuscular injection, takes 2 to 3 minutes to be effective but only lasts for 30 to 90 minutes, and must be supplemented with Emergency Services.
  - Signs of Overdose: Blue lips and fingernails, clammy cool skin, no response to painful stimuli or verbal stimuli, person does not wake up, shallow and slow breathing
- Medication Disposal
  - 24-Hour Drop-off Kiosk at the Lowell Police Department, Billerica Police Department and Chelmsford Police Department (pills only)
  - Unwanted medication and sharps disposal day in Lowell
- Needle Drop-off services
  - Call Syringe Collection Program at 978-674-1049 to report a discarded needle in Lowell
  - Drop-ff Locations:
    - Lowell Health Department at 978-674-1049
    - Lowell Senior Center at 978-674-1171
    - Lowell Regional Wastewater Utility at 978-674-4248
- Available City-Wide Programs
  - Lowell Community Opioid Outreach Programs,
  - MA Opioid Abuse and Prevention Collaborative of Greater Lowell
  - Partnerships for Success Program
- Hotlines
  - To talk to someone: 1-877-870-4673
  - Treatment assistance: 1-800327-5050
- Prevention Services:
  - SAMSHA
- Treatment Facilities
  - Lowell Habit OPCO Treatment Center
  - Lowell Community Health Center Substance Abuse Program
  - Self-Management And Recovery Training
- Detoxification services
  - Spectrum Health Systems
  - AdCare Treatment Centers
- Support Group Services
  - The Massachusetts Organization of Addiction Recovery (MOAR)
- Virtual Learning Resources about Substance Use
  - Drug Free Greater Lowell

## References

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