**ABSTRACT**

**Aims**

Accidental drug overdose is an important cause of mortality among ethnic minority populations. However, studies on accidental deaths in general and drug overdose deaths specifically have largely ignored Latinos. This is unfortunate given the growth of Latinos across the nation and the importance of studying deaths due to accidents which has been a leading cause of death. Moreover, recent research in New York City has shown rising drug overdose death rates. This study investigates the distribution of accidental drug overdose deaths among Whites, Blacks and Latinos in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

**Design**

Data were collected on all accidental deaths in Miami-Dade County between 1995 and 2002 from files in the Office of Medical Examiner Office. Over 25 percent of all accidental deaths over this period or 829 deaths were identified as drug overdose deaths. Almost 2400 accidental deaths were not attributed to drug toxicity. Data regarding demographic characteristics, cause of death, circumstances of death and toxicology were collected directly from files stored at the Miami-Dade Medical Examiner records office. Trained data coders used a standardized protocol and data collection forms.

**Findings**

Gender, race/ethnicity, age and city of death were associated with drug overdose deaths in Table 1. Non-drug accidental deaths were slightly higher than drug overdose deaths during this period were concentrated among adults in the 25 to 54 age categories. Relative to other types of accidental deaths, drug overdose deaths were substantial proportions of all accidental deaths in the cities of Miami, Miami Beach, North Miami Beach and North Miami. The overall geographic distribution of drug overdose death were not surprisingly heavily concentrated in Miami and Miami Beach (see Figure 1).

Most overdose deaths were attributed to cocaine and heroin use. Alcohol was an important contributor to both drug and non-drug accidental deaths.

There was an appreciable increase in drug overdose deaths since 1995. Figure 2 shows the percentage of accidental deaths attributed to drug overdose deaths since 1995. There was an appreciable increase in drug overdose deaths and the importance of studying deaths due to accidents which has been a leading cause of death. Moreover, recent research in New York City has shown rising drug overdose death rates. This study investigates the distribution of accidental drug overdose deaths among Whites, Blacks and Latinos in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

**Conclusion**

In Miami, the number and proportion of accidental deaths rose between 1995 and 2002. The influence of accidental overdose deaths varied but demographic characteristics, place, and of course the presence of cocaine and heroin, were important in distinguishing drug versus non-drug deaths.

One important influence is the role that "place" or city of death plays in shaping higher levels of drug overdose deaths. The higher level of overdose deaths in heavily urban or transient areas in Miami-Dade County is not surprising given the numerous urban problems associated with these locations including population density, high poverty and high crime. Yet the degree to which this reflects drug availability, drug use, drug-related crime or drug market activity is unknown but worth exploring further using community or census tract level variables, which have been examined in studies of accidental drug overdose deaths in New York City. Still, even these studies are recent and this topic is worth exploring in more detail.

This study has limitations. First, it requires another point of comparison. The degree to which these initial findings are generalizable outside of Miami is unknown. Drug use patterns might vary substantially from one region of the country to another. Also, our results do not account for non-lethal drug overdoses. The factors shaping lethal versus non-lethal drug overdose might vary. Still this is one step in filling the research gap in an important area.

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