

“The problem is, heroin is everywhere,” said Amy Owens, a detective with the Gainesville-Alachua County Drug Task Force.

Alachua County led the state with the highest rate of non-fatal drug overdoses last year.

The latest public data from the Enhanced State Opioid Overdose Surveillance Program shows that of the state’s 67 counties, Alachua County had the highest number of non-fatal overdoses in relation to its population.

Marion and Bradford counties also are listed in the top 10 in that ranking.

The data is compiled quarterly by the Florida Department of Health and funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Quarters two and three of 2018, which cover April to June and July to September, respectively, show the high rates in Alachua County. The rate is calculated based on the number of overdoses per 100,000 people.

In Alachua County, the rates were 149 overdoses per 100,000 people for quarter two and 190 per 100,000 in quarter three. The next highest rates were in Escambia County, with 137 overdoses per 100,000 in the second quarter and 113 per 100,000 in the third.

Amy Owens, a detective with the Gainesville-Alachua County Drug Task Force, said she’s not surprised by the report’s findings.

“The problem is, heroin is everywhere,” she said.

The task force, made up of law enforcement officials from the Gainesville Police Department, the Alachua County Sheriff’s Office and the University of Florida Police Department, has seen the greatest increase in opioid-related incidents compared with other drugs, Owens said.

Drug users shoot up what they believe is heroin, she said, but it is often laced with powerful Fentanyl.

Fentanyl is 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin.

“Their chances of overdosing greatly increase when Fentanyl is present,” Owens said.

The reports use data collected from Florida’s Emergency Medical Services Tracking and Reporting System to track and identify statistically significant changes in both opioid-involved overdoses and all other categories of drugs.

Quarter two and three reports both show Alachua County in the top 10 Florida counties for the total number of non-fatal, any-type-of-drug overdoses: 10th in quarter two, with 362 incidents; and ninth in quarter three, with 462 cases of overdoses. The highest overall number of overdoses occurred in Palm Beach County, with 1,031 in quarter two. Palm Beach County’s number dropped to 952 in the third quarter. Marion County is ranked fifth for the rate of non-fatal drug overdoses over both quarters. Bradford County is ranked eighth in quarter three.

In 2016, the Ocala Star-Banner reported that 16 people died of overdoses in the city.

In 2018, that number increased to 25, with six deaths taking place during one 10-day period in December.

Ocala Police Chief Greg Graham posted a message on the department's Facebook page in December 2018, urging anyone addicted to drugs to come forward and ask for help before it is too late.

"We're ready to help when you are ready to save yourself. We know it's scary, but you will not face this alone," he wrote. "Have courage."

None of North Central Florida's counties ranked in the top 10 for opioid-involved non-fatal overdoses during 2018, the Department of Health reports showed.

Cohen said one reason Alachua County has such a high rate is because the area is reflecting an overall statewide and national increase in overdoses

The National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that the rate of drug overdose deaths increased 5.9% between 2016 and 2017, with a majority of these involving opioids.

Drug abuse affects every gender, race and ethnicity, Owens said, but people in their mid-20s to mid-30s have the greatest number of overdose cases in the county.

The number of people in this age range make up about 15.6% of the county's total population, according to July 2018 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, which is higher than the state average of 13.1%.

The presence of the University of Florida and Santa Fe College in Gainesville may play a factor in the increased rate of these age groups.

"This is a problem that affects the entire community, everyone," Owens said.

Maggie Labarta, president and CEO of Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, said while Alachua County's rates may be highest in non-fatal overdoses, the Department of Health's data suggests the area is not faring much differently than other Florida counties.

Currently, about 32% of patients at Meridian, a nonprofit that provides mental illness and substance abuse treatment to 16 Florida counties, are seeking treatment for substance abuse disorders.

Labarta also said the number of patients recovering from opioid addiction has increased both in Alachua County and Florida as a whole over the past few years. The number of Meridian patients in opioid treatment in Alachua County increased from 420 to 530 from 2015 to 2018.

"Clearly, we are seeing a lot more people than we have been," she said.

People who are at-risk of overdosing and close friends or family members who may witness an overdose also now have free access to use naloxone, commonly under the brand name NARCAN, to quickly reverse an opioid overdose.

In Alachua County, Meridian, 4310 SW 13th St., is a kit-distribution site.

Complacency caused by having access to these resources may contribute to the problem, Owens said.

“We have encountered users who tell us that they rely on NARCAN to bring them back if they are overdosing,” Owens said. “So the fear of dying from an overdose is almost nonexistent.”

Labarta, from Meridian, disagrees with that assessment. She compared a substance abuser using naloxone to a diabetic who might carry extra insulin with them in case they consume extra sugar during the day.

Meridian has distributed between 2,500 and 3,000 NARCAN kits so far, Labarta said, and 65 overdose reversals have occurred as a result in the county.

“That’s 65 instances where lives were saved,” Labarta said.

Decreasing the stigma associated with drug abuse is necessary to make progress, she said, much like talking about depression has become more accepted in society.

“We’ve not yet gotten there with substance abuse,” she said. “Nobody wants to be judged.”

“Substances hijack your brain.”

Non-fatal overdoses in Alachua County also are being caused by “spice,” a synthetic cannabinoid similar to marijuana and “Molly” or “Scram,” which are the common names for the stimulant MDVP.

“Molly” is a drug that is sometimes popular among college students, Owens said, though “Spice” is not.

The task force has turned to proactive tactics to attack the root of the problem.

Owens said law enforcement has shifted its tactics to address the issue, hoping to have greater success to catch and prosecute those they view as the real criminals: the dealers.

“They are the ones who are selling the substance which leads to the overdose,” she said.

Under Florida’s Good Samaritan Act, drug users who overdose are protected from criminal prosecution for drug possession.

Authorities try to work with users to find out who is supplying them with the drugs in the first place, in an attempt to get it off the streets completely.

In January, the task force also began using new software to track the flow of drug sales across the region using mapping technology.

While Owens is hopeful that the opioid crisis will be overcome in Alachua County and nationwide, she says that whenever one drug becomes eradicated in a society, another often takes its place.

“We’re always going to have another drug to combat,” she said. “It’s always an uphill battle.”



One of the main culprits behind the growing opioid epidemic are synthetic opioids like fentanyl. Nationally, the death rate from these drugs has increased by 1,125% between 2011 and 2017, according to mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While fentanyl and other synthetic opioids are used in prescription drugs, these substances are increasingly being illegally manufactured and distributed alongside—or mixed with—illegal drugs like heroin. Many opioid-related deaths involve more than one type of drug.

The data for this report shows opioid-related overdose deaths due to fentanyl and other synthetic opioids (excluding methadone) in Alachua County, Florida.

Data is for the second and third quarters of 2018

Marion and Alachua counties had some of the state's highest rates of non-fatal drug overdoses during the second and third quarters of 2018, according to the latest public data from the Enhanced State Opioid Overdose Surveillance Program.

Alachua County had 149 all drug-involved non-fatal overdoses per 100,000 people for quarter two (April-June) and 190.2 per 100,000 in quarter three (July-September). That was highest in the state for both quarters.

Marion County's rate was 85.1 per 100,000 residents in the second quarter and 90.3 in the third — fifth highest among Florida's 67 counties in both quarters.

The data is compiled quarterly by the Florida Department of Health and funded through the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The reports use data collected from Florida's Emergency Medical Services Tracking and Reporting System to track and identify statistically significant changes in both opioid-involved overdoses and all other categories of drugs.

Quarter two and three reports both show Alachua County in the top 10 Florida counties for the total number of non-fatal, any-type-of-drug overdoses: It was 10th in quarter two, with 362 incidents; and ninth in quarter three, with 462 cases of overdoses. The highest overall number of overdoses for both quarters occurred in Palm Beach County, with 1,031 in quarter two and 952 in quarter three.

No North Central Florida county ranked in the Top 10 for opioid-involved non-fatal overdoses during quarters two and three of 2018, the Department of Health reports showed.