

Supporting Children Who Lose Parents to Accidental Overdose

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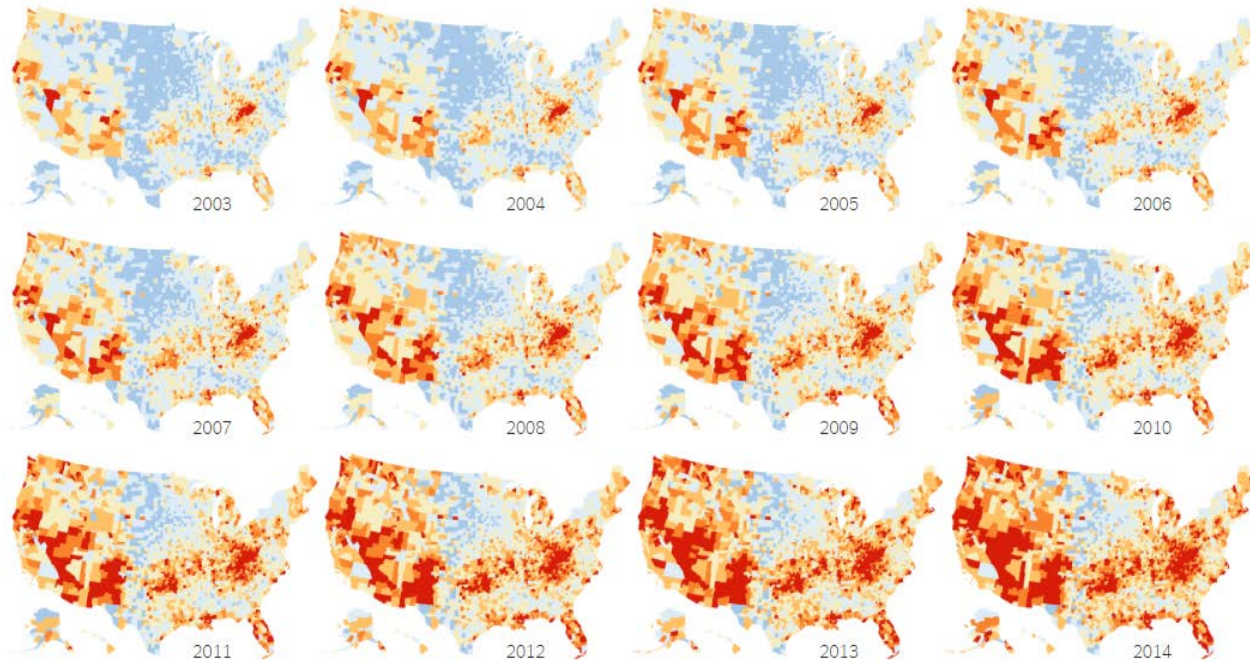
Overview

- Background
- Children left behind analysis: Allegheny County, PA
- Supporting children and families
- Questions/discussion



Background on Overdose and Childhood Bereavement

Drug overdose rates throughout U.S.



Source: NY Times, January 2016

CDC estimates 72,000 deaths due to drug overdose in the U.S. in 2017.

- Opioids contributed to about 68% (49,068) of those deaths¹
- More than the number of U.S. military casualties in the Vietnam War (58,220).
- More than the number of deaths due to car accidents in 2017 (40,100)³

Sources

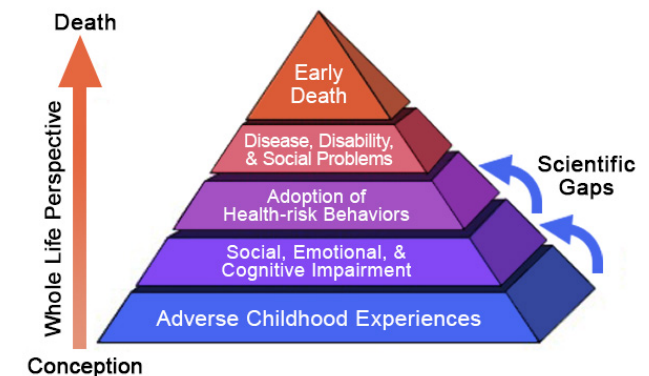
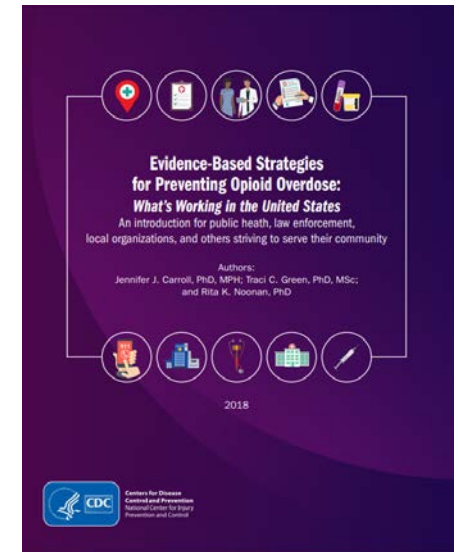
¹ CDC: www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm

² National Archives: www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics

³ National Safety Council: <https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates>

Why is this an important topic?

- Prevention efforts have attempted to address individual- and community-level risks of overdose.
- The overdose epidemic is also affecting families. People who are at risk or who have died of an overdose are connected to families.
- There are unique risks for children who have experienced an unexpected parental death
- “Substance misuse within the household” has been identified as one of the *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*



Efforts (rightfully) focused on overdose prevention

- Targeted Naloxone Distribution
- Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)
- Academic Detailing
- Eliminating Prior-Authorization Requirements for Medications for Opioid Use Disorder
- Screening for Fentanyl in Routine Clinical Toxicology Testing
- 911 Good Samaritan Laws
- Naloxone Distribution in Treatment Centers and Criminal Justice Settings
- MAT in Criminal Justice Settings and Upon Release
- Initiating Buprenorphine-based MAT in Emergency Departments
- Syringe Services Programs



Opioid epidemic is affecting families

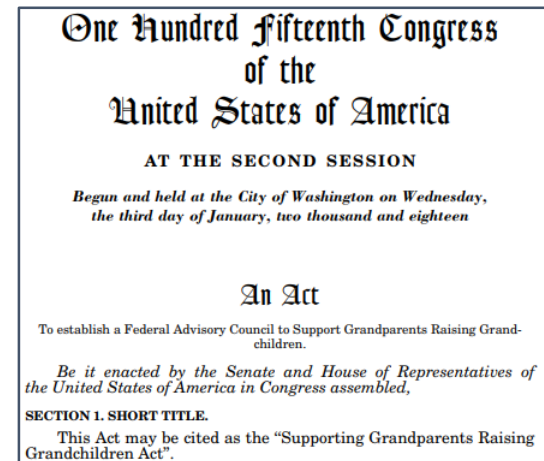
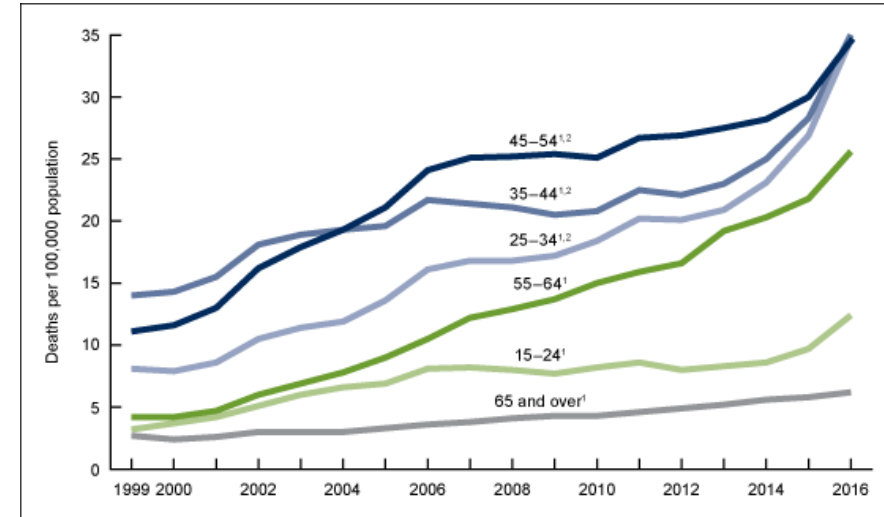
- Deaths occurring among those in their child rearing years.
- As the number of overdose deaths rise, so does the number of families and children affected.
- Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (July 2018)⁵
 - *“More than 2,500,000 grandparents in the United States are the primary caretaker of their grandchildren.....”*
 - *“Between 2009 and 2016, the incidence of parental alcohol or other drug use as a contributing factor for children’s out-of-home placement rose from 25.4 to 37.4 percent”*
 - *“The number of foster children placed with a grandparent or other relative increased from 24 percent in 2006 to 32 percent in 2016...”*

Sources

⁴ CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db294.htm>

⁵ Congress.gov: <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/s1091/BILLS-115s1091enr.pdf>

Age-adjusted drug overdose death rates, by opioid category: United States, 1999–2016⁴



Impact of the loss of a parent/caregiver

- The death of a close family member may present unique risks to a child's development. Negative effects can include:
 - limited emotional availability of surviving caregivers and others who provide social support,
 - challenges to the child's self-efficacy and self-esteem,
 - disruptions in daily family life, and
 - inhibited communication with parents
- When compared to their peers, children who have lost a parent/caregiver are at increased risk for:
 - depression and post-traumatic stress disorder,
 - social withdrawal,
 - anxiety,
 - reduced self-esteem,
 - internalizing and externalizing symptoms,
 - suicide attempts and suicide, and
 - conduct disorder.

Risks of sudden or unexpected loss

- Complicated grief: prolonged grief symptoms
- Childhood traumatic grief: involves trauma symptoms that prevent the child from negotiating the typical steps associated with normal bereavement
- The Burden of Bereavement Study (2018)
 - 7-year longitudinal study
 - Bereavement by sudden parental death was associated with an increased incidence of depression, primarily during the first two years, along with post-traumatic stress disorder and functional impairment
 - Early identification and intervention may lessen the long-term impact

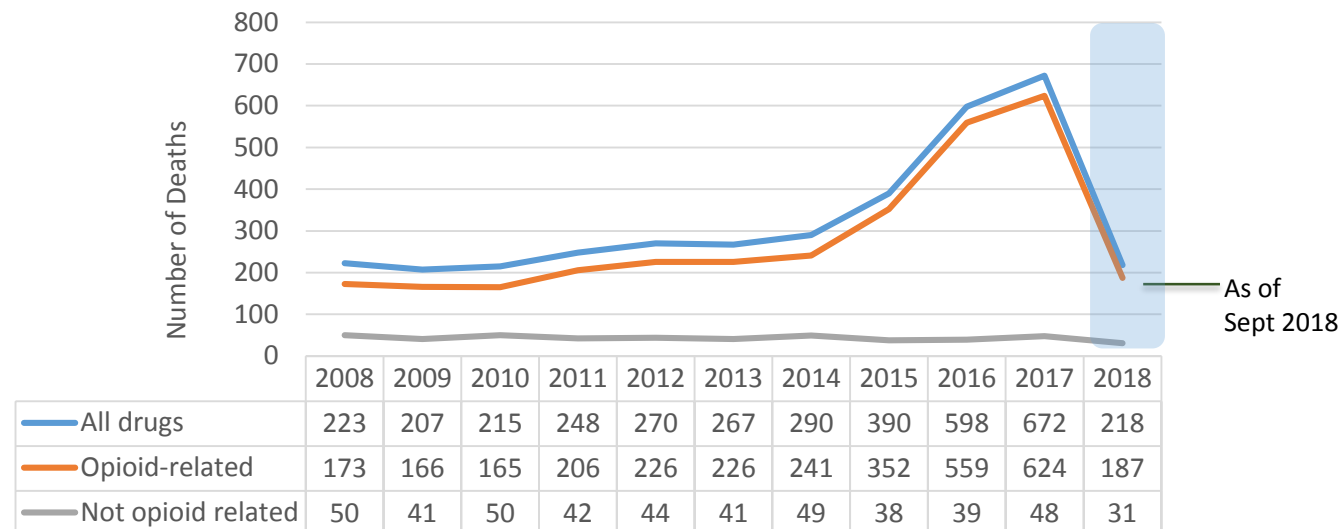


The Children Left Behind from Drug Overdoses, Suicides and Homicides in Allegheny County, PA

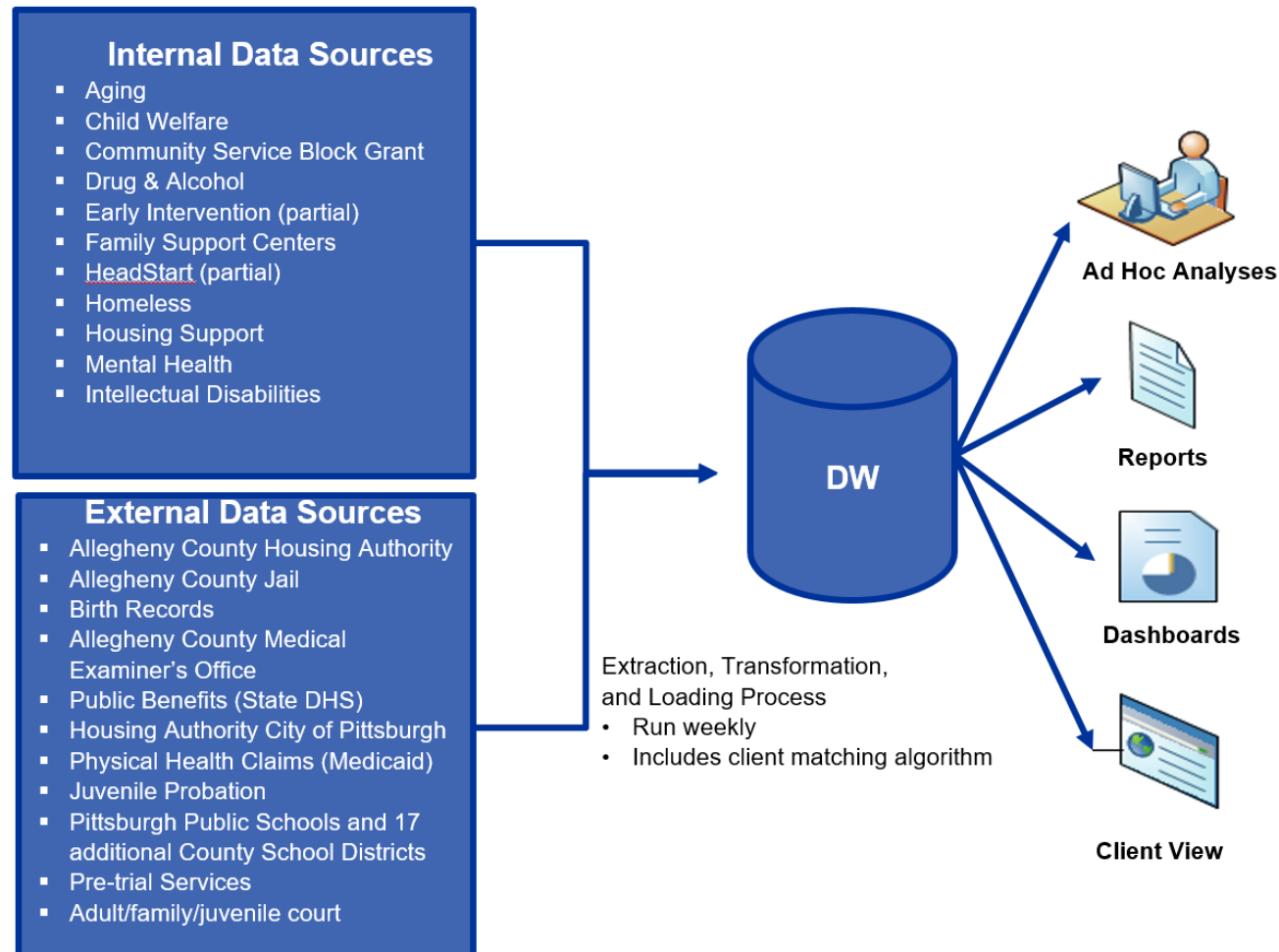
Purpose of the analysis

- Identify the prevalence of children in Allegheny County who have experienced a sudden, unexpected or traumatic loss resulting from a parent's fatal drug overdose, homicide or suicide
- Describe the human services and public system encounters of this group of children to identify potential mental health support and other social service needs.

Fatal Drug Overdoses in Allegheny County: 2008-present

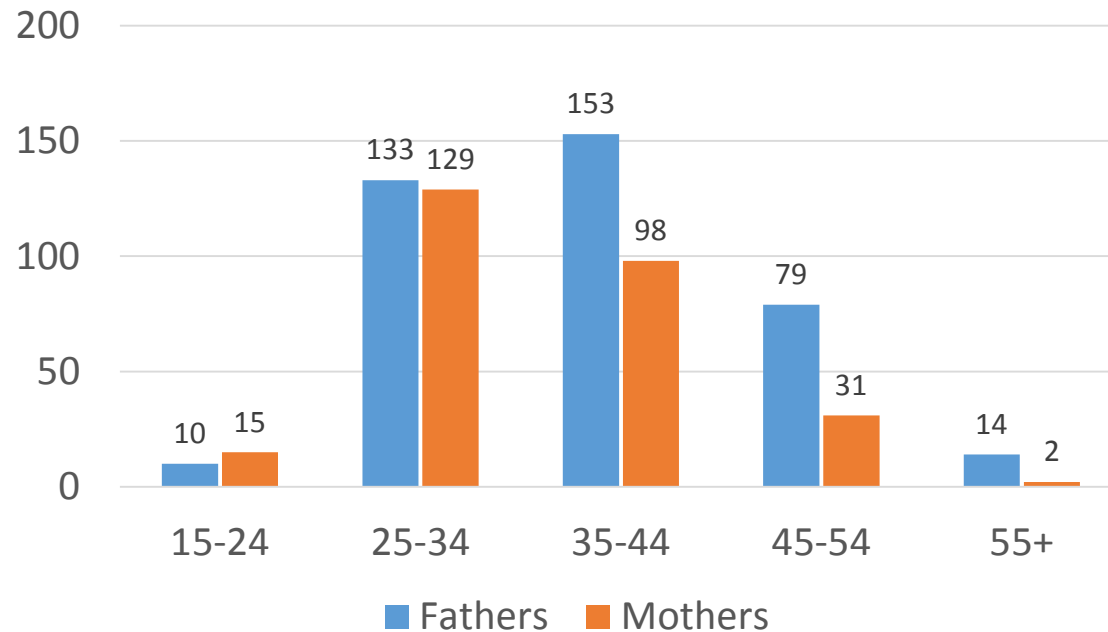


Allegheny County Data Warehouse



Fatal Overdoses among Adults/Parents

Adult/parents who died of an overdose (n=664)



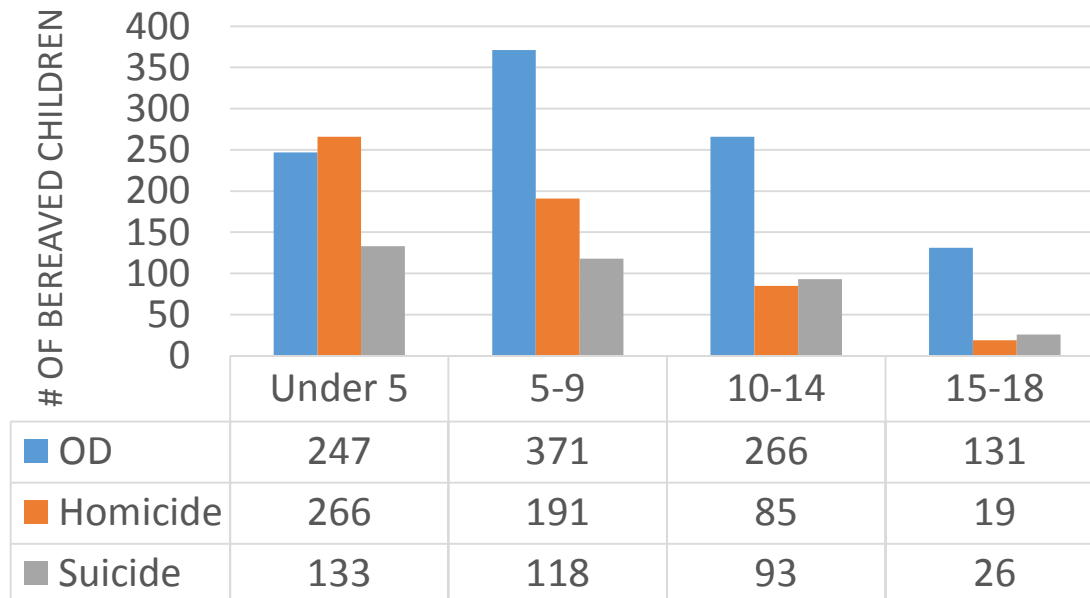
- 389 (59%) were fathers
- 275 (41%) were mothers.
- 74% were between 25-44 years old

Children affected by unexpected loss

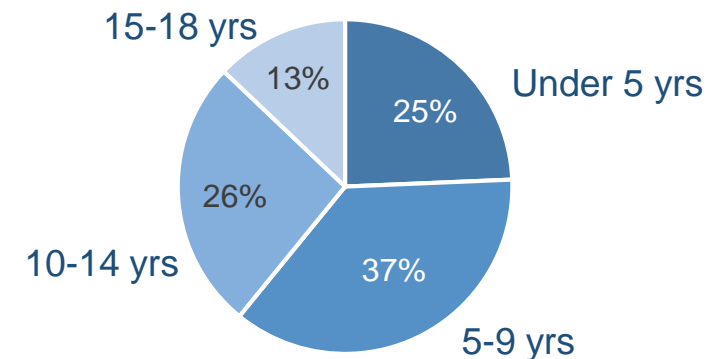
1,008 children affected by parent's overdose death: 2003-2017

Overdose	Homicide	Suicide
1,008	571	374

Number of children by age and cause of death



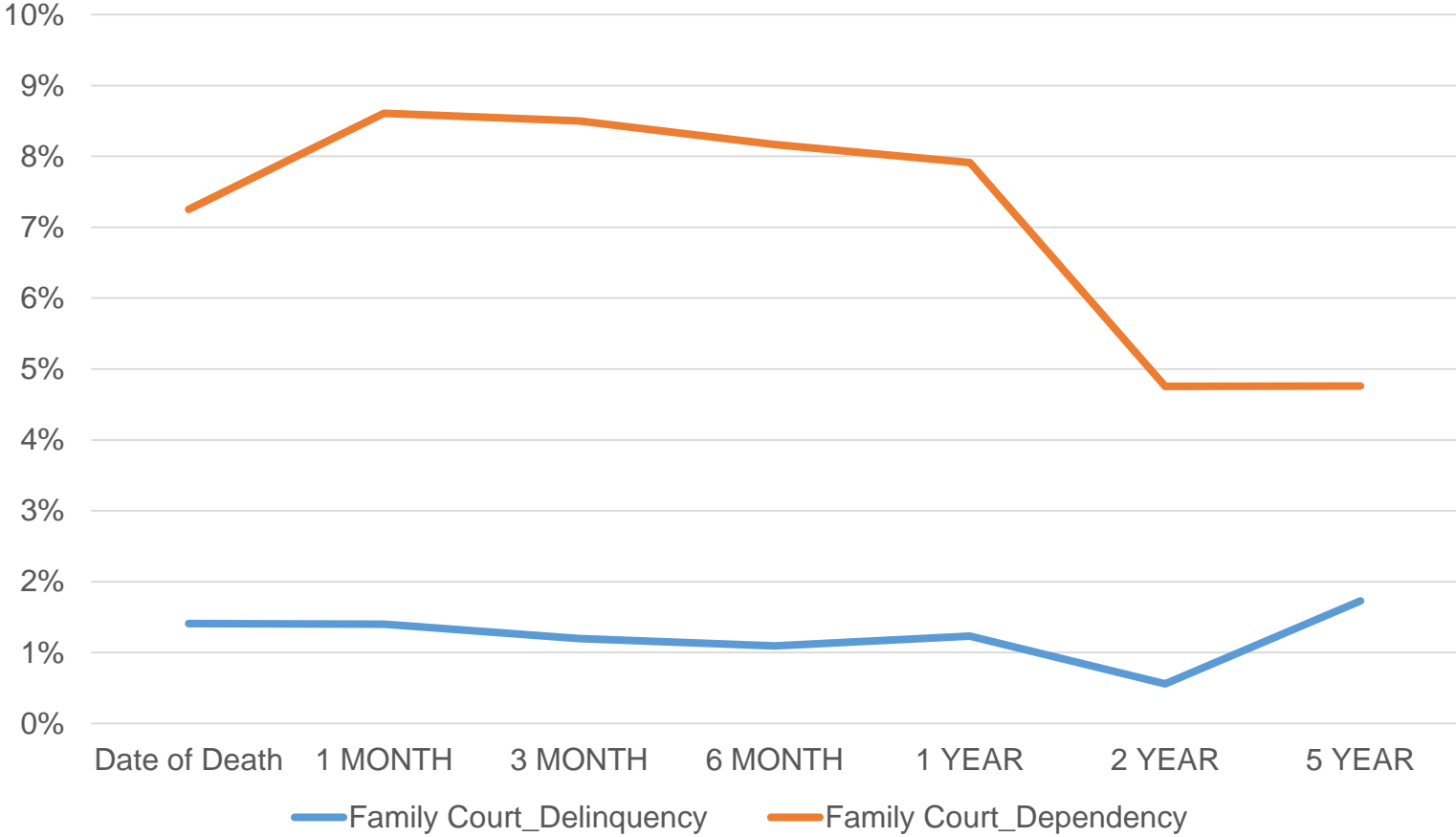
% of children by age whose parent(s) died of an overdose (n =1,008)



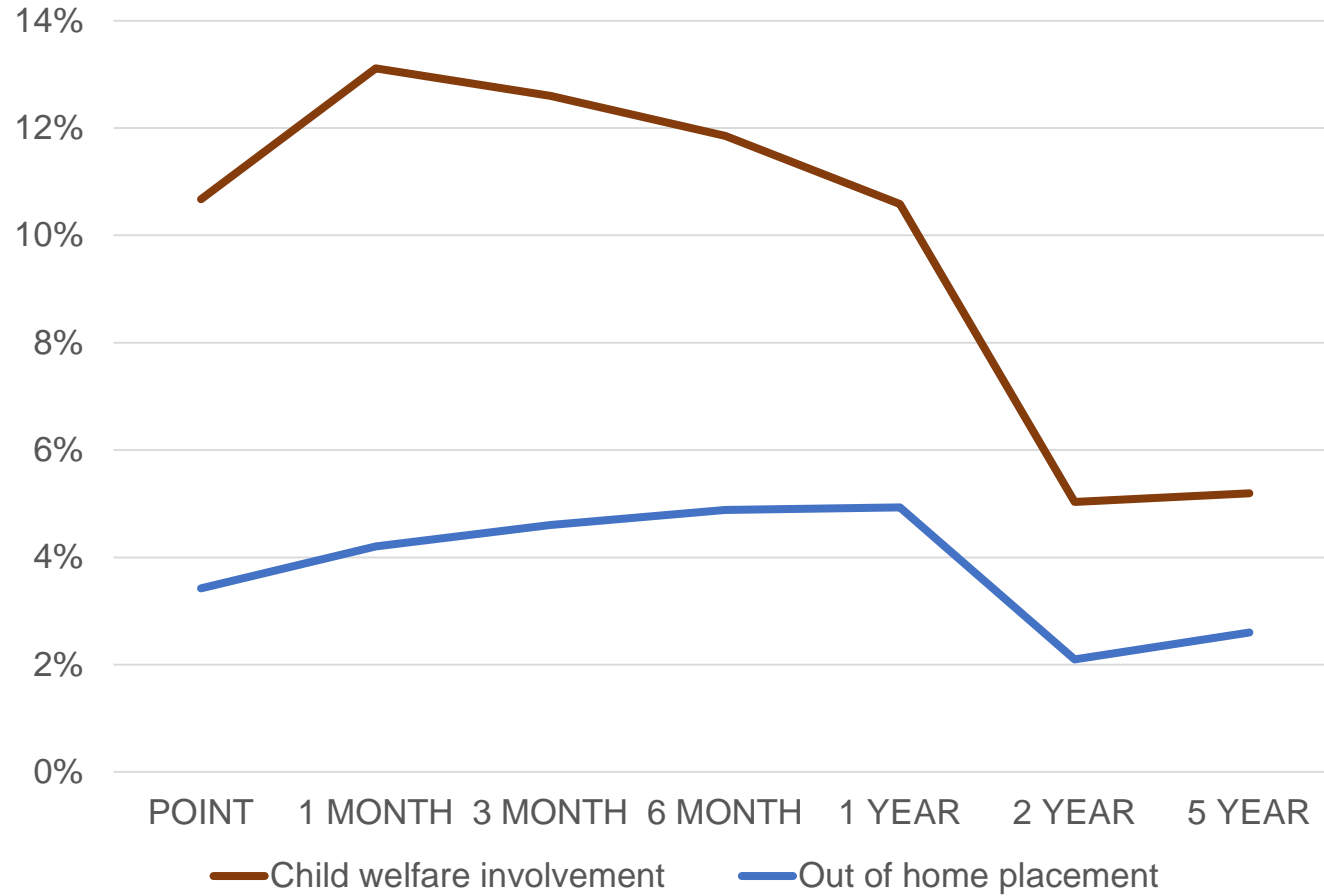


Public system experiences of children following a parent's overdose death

Family Court



Child welfare



Publicly-funded mental health treatment





Supporting children and families

It starts with self-awareness

Supporting grieving children begins with examining our own thoughts, beliefs and attitudes about death.

- Using clear, direct language vs. euphemisms
- Managing the natural desire to avoid loss or protect children from pain
- Acknowledging the grief experience vs. pressure to “be strong”, “move on” or “get over” one’s grief
- Learning about the grief process and the emotional, cognitive and behavioral manifestations in children

Understanding potential grief issues

- Stigma of addiction and opioid abuse
- Disenfranchised grief
- Shame or embarrassment
- Anger
- Guilt
- Traumatic grief



Photo: <https://ca-mh.com/children-love-children-grieve/>

Importance of early identification and treatment

- Caregivers may be struggling with multiple demands due to impact of sudden loss.
- Possibility of pre-existing mental health issues or other Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- Early support and intervention can reduce the long-term impact on functional impairment. (Pham et al., 2018)

Helping children cope

Interventions that promote adaptive grieving include:

- Education about death and grief
- Supporting emotional expression
- Cognitive coping skills
- Preserving positive memories
- Preparing for grief triggers
- Stress management and resilience skills

Source: Cohen and Mannarino, 2011

Helping children cope

Other therapies or creative activities:

- Art therapy
- Narrative therapy
- Music
- Commemorating the person who died



Thoughts on the subject of closure

- Grief throughout the lifespan: school events, parent/teacher conferences, proms, graduations, weddings...
- Navigating the rhetoric of closure (Berns, 2011)
 - Redefining the relationship
 - Discovering your own path
 - Carrying grief and joy together



Questions?



Thank you

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Resources

- The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families (www.dougy.org)
- Eluna - Formerly the Moyer Foundation (<https://elunanetwork.org>)
- Center for Loss & Life Transition (www.centerforloss.com)
- GRASP: Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing (<http://grasphelp.org>)
- The National Alliance for Grieving Children (<https://childrengrieve.org>)
- Grief.com (<https://grief.com>)
- Hello Grief (www.hellogrief.org)

Resources

- *A Complete Book about Death for Kids*, Earl A. Grollman and Joy Johnson (Editors)
- *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*, by Earl A. Grollman
- *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant
- *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World*, by Linda Goldman (2005)
- *Treating Trauma and Traumatic Grief in Children and Adolescents*, by Judith A. Cohen, Anthony P. Mannarino and Esther Deblinger (2017)
- *Children's Encounters with Death, Bereavement and Coping*, Charles A. Corr and David E. Balk, Editors (2010)
- *Counseling Children and Adolescents Through Grief and Loss*, by Jody J. Fiorini and Jodi Ann Mullen (2006)

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