Opioid crisis? Study says drug combos cause many deaths

By Felice J. Fryer

It may be time to stop talking about the "opioid crisis." Not because the crisis is over — some five people a day continue to die of overdoses in Massachusetts. But a new analysis reveals that opioids are far from the only problem. The vast majority of people who died of opioid-related overdoses in the state had taken drugs along with heroin and fentanyl, including stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamine. Only 17 percent had taken opioids and nothing else.

"At this point we're not dealing with an opioid overdose crisis," said Dr. Joshua A. Barocas, an infectious disease specialist at Boston Medical Center and lead author of the study, published last month in the Journal of Drug and Alcohol Dependence. "While providers in the addiction field have long been aware of the rise of cocaine and methamphetamine, the study provides data to back up the anecdote. And it points to social and demographic factors, such as race and homelessness, that affect who is most at risk.

The study also raises the possibility that a significant proportion of those who die weren't even addicted to opioids; rather they were probably cocaine users who inadvertently ingested cocaine contaminated with fentanyl. Black people, who are at higher risk for cocaine use, were twice as likely to whites to die with both opioids and stimulants.

The findings suggest, Barocas said, that the state needs to broaden its focus, considering all kinds of addiction and the social factors that

The study confirms what we've been seeing — that stimulants are playing an increasing role in overdose deaths. This likely represents intentional mixing of the drugs...