

Heroin overdose deaths on the rise in the US

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We live at a moment of mostly terrible statistics. Some, such as the figures on AIDS in Africa or the decline in life expectancy in the former Soviet Union, reveal social catastrophe. Others puncture the pretensions of a society and reveal, in the face of official hypocrisy and lies, *what is*.

Figures cited in two reports published July 21 in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* fall into the latter category. The studies suggest that deaths from heroin overdose in the US have increased sufficiently in recent years to constitute a major public health problem.

The reports consider the incidence of heroin overdoses in two areas of the Pacific Northwest: Multnomah County, Oregon, three-quarters of whose population reside in Portland, and King County, Washington, which includes Seattle. According to the studies, overdose deaths have substantially increased over the past five years. In Multnomah County, Oregon's most populous county, the number of heroin overdose deaths climbed from 46 in 1993 to 111 in 1999, an increase of 141 percent. In King County, deaths climbed by 134 percent. Most overdose deaths were among men (more than 80 percent) and the ethnic composition of the deceased reflected the overall population—overwhelmingly white.

Dr. Gary Oxman, public health officer in Multnomah County, told the press that overdose deaths among young and middle-aged men, ages 25 to 54, "cause more deaths than AIDS and about the same number as heart disease and cancer." The Drug Abuse Warning Network received reports over the four-year period 1994-98 of 20,140 drug-induced deaths where opiates, including heroin, were detected. The number of deaths increased by 25.7 percent over that span.

A number of immediate factors apparently contribute to the rise in overdose deaths. Large quantities of "black tar" heroin from Mexico and South America are

available and relatively inexpensive on the West Coast. Another factor is an increase in the percentage of heroin users injecting the drug, a method that delivers a quick dose to the body, with potentially more dangerous consequences.

Drug laws carrying vindictive and irrational penalties—championed by both Republicans and Democrats—have also contributed to the higher death rate. Researchers found that heroin users' "responses to a companion's overdose reflected a strong desire to avoid contact with law enforcement and medical assistance. Three fourths of respondents reported that they hesitated to call for emergency assistance for fear of being arrested. Many attempted to resuscitate overdosed companions on their own. Users described leaving overdose victims in public places, hoping they would be discovered and helped by others."

Heroin's effect on the human body and psyche, recorded by scientists, artists and countless victims alike, is well known. In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, considerable numbers of human beings (an estimated 2.4 million in the US) choose to use the substance. Official commentators on heroin addiction never discuss why this is the case. The National Institute on Drug Abuse's *Heroin: Abuse and Addiction*, for example, asks "What is heroin?", "What is the scope of heroin use in the United States?" and "How is heroin used?", but not "Why is heroin used?"

The drug has been described as an all-powerful painkiller. One astute contemporary commentator notes that heroin "is a total escape into oblivion, for the ability to think is devastated.... For where there is no thought, there is no psychological stress, no trauma, and no pain.... Heroin use is a temporary escape from the human condition—hopelessness, purposelessness, the future, depression, and even day-to-day struggles incurred simply by being a living, breathing person."

People get addicted to heroin for all sorts of

individual, even accidental reasons. Researchers cite the glamorization of the drug in recent films and music as one factor. Taken as a whole, however, the rate of heroin addiction and death by overdose has to be seen as a measurement, one among many, of growing despair and hopelessness. Many young people in the US think very little of their chances in life.

It should be noted in this regard that the Pacific Northwest, where the epidemic of overdose deaths is taking place, is home to one of the great success stories of American capitalism, Microsoft. Bill Gates's example demonstrates, we are endlessly told, that anyone in the “New Economy” can make it big. Clearly many are not convinced.

Dr. Oxman thinks he is commenting on the relative cheapness of the drug when he says, “In today's economy you can work a minimum-wage job and scrape up enough for housing and food and be a heroin addict,” but, in fact, he is pointing unwittingly to a harsh reality of American life. The main point is not so much that young people who work in a convenience store or a fast-food restaurant—and see no better prospect in the offing—*can afford* to do drugs, but that so many feel they *need* to.



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