

US heroin overdose death rates nearly quadrupled since 2000

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A recent report from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) has found that death rates from heroin overdose in the United States have increased dramatically since 2010, nearly quadrupling from 0.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2000 to 2.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2013.

By far, the steepest rise in death rates from heroin overdose occurred between 2010 and 2013, when the rate increased by an average of 37 percent each year, while it had risen on average 6 percent yearly over the previous decade.

While falsely touted by politicians as a period of economic “recovery,” these statistics indicate that many turned to hard drugs as a means to cope with the reality of mass unemployment and declining living standards.

Significantly, the report finds that, from 2010-2013, death rates from heroin overdose increased across all age, sex, race and ethnicity groups, with the largest increases seen among non-Hispanic white persons.

During this time, men have disproportionately died from heroin overdose at a rate four times that of women, but both sexes saw a roughly threefold increase in death rates, with the age-adjusted rate among men increasing from 1.6 to 4.2 per 100,000 for men and from 0.4 to 1.2 per 100,000 for women.

Geographically, the Midwest and Northeast regions have seen a significantly higher upsurge in death rates than the West and South, while all regions have seen a dramatic increase in deaths.

Researchers Holly Hedegaard, M.D., M.S.P.H.; Li-Hui Chen, M.S., Ph.D.; and Margaret Warner, Ph.D. reported that between 2000 and 2013, “the age-adjusted rate for heroin-related drug-poisoning deaths increased nearly 11-fold in the Midwest region (from 0.4 to 4.3 per 100,000), more than fourfold in the Northeast

region (from 0.9 to 3.9), more than threefold in the South region (from 0.5 to 1.7), and doubled in the West region (from 0.9 to 1.8).”

In recent years, the notorious Sinaloa cartel in Mexico has monopolized the trade of heroin in the Midwest, and is estimated to supply 70 to 80 percent of the illegal narcotics trade across the entire region.

Also, since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, that country is estimated to have seen an escalation in cultivated areas of opium production from 8,000 to 209,000 hectares, according to the UN Office for Drug and Crime.

The study also determined that in 2000-2013 the rate for heroin-related overdose deaths was highest among adults aged 25-44. The report states that “from 2010 through 2013, the death rate for adults aged 18-24 increased 2.3-fold from 1.7 to 3.9 per 100,000, for those aged 25-44 the rate increased 2.8-fold from 1.9 to 5.4, and for those aged 45-64 the rate increased 2.7-fold from 1.1 to 3.0.”

The spike in heroin overdose deaths is intimately tied to the more widespread, deepening wave of addiction to legal opioids, including oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet), hydrocodone (Vicodin, Zohydro), methadone and morphine.

Once a patient has built up a tolerance to these painkillers, or can no longer refill their prescription and is experiencing withdrawal, they increasingly turn to heroin, which has become much cheaper and higher in quality in recent years following the growth in production in Mexico, Afghanistan and other parts of the world.

Another recent study found that 80 percent of heroin users had previously abused prescription opioids. The study also found that in the last 15 years, at least 100,000 people have died from prescription opioid

abuse. Like legal opioids, heroin is highly addictive.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) operates in the interests of the giant pharmaceuticals, encouraging overworked doctors to simply prescribe the strongest analgesics, enormously benefiting the profit margins of Big Pharma.

In the fall of 2013, the FDA approved a new painkiller called Zohydro, which contains a pure form of hydrocodone and is up to 10 times as strong an opiate as Vicodin. At the time, the *Washington Post* revealed that drug companies paid up to \$25,000 to attend meetings in which scientists advised the FDA on the safety and effectiveness of painkillers.

The FDA approved Zohydro despite the fact that its own advisory committee voted 12 to 2 against approval, citing the drug's potential to exacerbate the opioid abuse epidemic.

The findings of the NCHS report serve as a barometer of the current conditions of life in America, and expose one of the many symptoms of the decay of capitalist society more broadly. Heroin, one of the most powerful analgesics, is used as a means to numb oneself from pain and induce a euphoria not present in reality.

Increasingly, broad sections of the population see no future in an economic system driven by corporate greed, and characterized by mass unemployment and poverty. Disillusioned by the anarchic capitalist economy, many are opting out and seek merely to escape, with often deadly ramifications.



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