US heroin deaths triple in four years

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Heroin use more than doubled in the United States between 2007 and 2013, according to a July 7 report by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In an even shorter time span, between 2010 and 2013, deaths from heroin overdose almost tripled.

Heroin, an opioid street drug, is extremely addictive and highly lethal. The CDC report states that in 2013 an estimated 517,000 people in the United States used heroin. That same year, 8,257 people died of overdoses involving the drug.

This epidemic, as it is now classified by the CDC, comes amid the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. It is no surprise that two sections of society most brutalized by the crisis, poor people and youth, are also the two sections that have the highest rates of heroin use and have seen the largest increase in usage rates.

For every 1,000 people aged 12 or older in the United States living in a household earning less than $20,000 a year, 5.5 used heroin in 2013. This was more than three times the rate for people living in households making more than $50,000.

In 2013, young people between the ages of 18 and 25 used heroin at a rate of 7.3 per thousand people, a 109 percent increase from 2003. Those over the age of 25 use heroin less, at a rate of 1.9 per thousand people.

The concurrence of economic distress and heroin use finds expression in the city of Baltimore. “As many as one in 10 of the city’s residents are addicted,” according to a March 2015 “ABC News” special entitled “Baltimore is the U.S. Heroin Capital.” Life is so bleak for working class teens that a study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that Baltimore teens faced worse health conditions and life choices than their counterparts in urban Nigeria, India and China.

Heroin abuse has grown alongside a larger synthetic-opiate drug addiction epidemic in the United States. Between 2003 and 2013 prescription drug use quadrupled. In 2013, 6.1 million Americans abused prescription drugs, of which, opioids, such as Vicodin, OxyContin and Percocet, constituted the majority. Eighty percent of heroin users have also used prescription opiates.

The CDC report notes that while heroin is still primarily used amongst poor city-dwellers, groups with historically low rates of use, such as women, those with incomes exceeding $50,000 a year, and those with private insurance have also increasedpossibly due to heroin being a cheaper alternative to these prescription drugs. The CDC, however, states that in areas where prescription drug abuse increased, heroin abuse did too. This means that there is not an exodus from prescription medication to heroin, but an increase in both simultaneously.

Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) Acting Administrator, Chuck Rosenberg, commented to CNN regarding the report. He stated that 120 people died each day in the United States due to drug overdose and that his agency would “continue to target the criminal gangs that supply heroin, and we will work to educate folks about the dangers and to reduce demand.”

The increased availability of heroin in the US is related to the US military’s invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, the world’s largest producer of opium, a precursor of heroin.

Heroin production has increased as Afghani farmers struggle to achieve an income amid decades of war and occupation. In addition to being lucrative in a time of profound insecurity, heroin is produced because the fruit and nut tree groves the climate allows have been destroyed. According to the Afghanistan government, in southern Kandahar province alone $100 million damage was done to fruit crops and homes between the US invasion in 2001 and 2011.

An August 2010 a *Washington Post* article, for

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instance, documents how US soldiers would destroy vineyards and orchards to ensure Taliban fighters had no place to hide mines.

In 2013, 209,000 hectares of opium were cultivated in Afghanistan, up from 82,000 hectares in 2000.

The enormous growth in heroin use, particularly among young people, reflects the disastrous social and economic reality in the United States, where young people confront mass unemployment and shrinking prospects for education.

This summer, only about one in four US teenagers will hold a job, down from one in two fifteen years ago.

To the extent that jobs are available, they are disproportionately low-wage, part-time, and contingent. A 2014 report by the National Employment Law Project noted that while US businesses have added 1.85 million low-wage jobs over the past six years, they have eliminated 1.83 million medium-wage and high-wage jobs.

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