

Akron, Ohio sees dozens of heroin overdoses over the weekend

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At least two dozen people in the city of Akron, Ohio overdosed on heroin over the weekend. At least eight deaths are suspected to be heroin-related. The spate of overdoses comes on the heels of an outbreak in July that involved 236 people and claimed 20 lives.

Investigators fear that these latest cases involve opioids even more potent than heroin: fentanyl, which is hundreds of times more potent than pharmacy-grade heroin; and carfentanil, which is a hundred times more potent than fentanyl and is used to sedate large animals such as elephants. The latter was found in Akron's July outbreak. At least six doses of the opioid blocker naxolone are required to revive a human who has taken carfentanil.

The crisis in Akron is only a slice of the social devastation sweeping across the United States. Almost half a million Americans have died from drug overdoses since 2000, with over half of all cases involving opioids such as heroin.

Deaths caused by heroin overdoses have almost tripled between 2010 and 2013. There were nearly 48,000 drug overdose deaths in 2014, the highest on record. Young people, who have borne the brunt of an economic crisis that is now in its eighth year, have been hit especially hard; heroin use among those aged 18-25 has doubled in the past decade.

The acting administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, Chuck Rosenberg, called the wave of opioid overdoses "unprecedented and horrific."

August was marked by spikes of opioid overdoses in areas of extreme social distress throughout the country. In Milwaukee County in Wisconsin 20 people died from fentanyl overdoses during the month's first two weeks. The wave of deaths continued as Milwaukee County saw a record 12 suspected overdose deaths in just the first five days of September.

Huntington, West Virginia, saw 26 carfentanil-related overdoses in the span of just four hours on August 15th. Three hundred opioid overdoses have been reported in the Cincinnati region since mid-August, some involving carfentanil.

Akron lies in the center of America's so-called "Rust Belt", a sprawling region covering the former industrial powerhouses of the northern United States. The city, once known as the rubber capital of the world, has been ravaged by decades of deindustrialisation. Its population has fallen from a peak of 290,000 in 1960 to 198,000 today. Over a quarter of the city's residents—some 51,000 people—live in poverty. Akron has already seen 112 heroin overdose-related deaths so far this year.

As federal and state authorities crack down on prescription painkiller use and prescription guidelines become more stringent, addicts have turned to street heroin, which is purer, cheaper and easier to obtain.

The prevalence of heroin is tied to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Afghan farmers are compelled to grow opium over other crops, whose export requires infrastructure that has been largely destroyed by fifteen years of war. The country now produces over 90 percent of the world's supply of opium poppy.

Fentanyl and carfentanil, responsible for increasing shares of opioid overdose deaths nationwide, are even cheaper to manufacture than heroin and are up to twenty times more profitable for drug dealers to sell than straight heroin. In addition, as synthetic drugs, they can be produced in a laboratory anywhere in the world.

Addicts who seek help wait for weeks on waiting lists as hospitals and rehabilitation clinics struggle with a dearth of beds.

Meanwhile the price of the drug used to reverse opioid overdoses, Naloxone, which is responsible for saving the lives of thousands of people across the country, has spiked from \$1 a dose a decade ago to more than \$40 a dose today. Police officers and EMTs throughout the US have begun to carry the drug to revive overdose victims when they find them passed out in their homes, cars, public restrooms or other public areas.

“Where do we go for help?” despaired an Akron mother at a recent panel discussion sponsored by the Akron Beacon Journal. “I can’t figure it out—there’s warrants for [my daughter’s] arrest, she can’t get arrested to save her life because the jails are full so she can’t get forced into rehab. Where does the help come from? I don’t know.”

The criminalization of drug addiction has done nothing to alleviate the social misery that surrounds vast swathes of the population, let alone stem the surge in drug overdose deaths. Facing the eradication of decent jobs, accessible health care, affordable housing and quality education, drug-dependent workers and youth are told that they can “turn their lives around” by finding succor in the programs and charities run by religious organizations.



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