

# Serious outbreaks of syphilis and hepatitis underscore social crisis in America

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30 August 2017

Diseases considered largely eradicated in modern society are breaking out in the United States as yet another devastating consequence of the present social crisis.

The most recent data, for 2015, reveals that nearly 24,000 cases of early-stage syphilis, the sexually transmitted infection that can lead to blindness, paralysis and dementia, were reported that year in the United States. This represented a 19 percent rise over the previous year. The total number of sufferers in 2015, including those with later-stage disease, was nearly 75,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

More recent evidence indicates that the outbreak has only worsened since 2015. Oklahoma City recently reported possibly the country's most severe outbreak. Dozens of cases were discovered that are believed to have spread rapidly through gang networks and prostitution rings.

Rates are rising in Oklahoma's capital city among white women and their infants. Similar trends are being reported nationwide. Nearly five times more babies are being born at present with syphilis than with HIV.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles County has recently reported a record outbreak of hepatitis A, leading to the deaths of 14 people thus far and sending hundreds to the hospital for treatment. The latest data from San Diego County indicate that more than 350 cases have been diagnosed there since the beginning of the year and 264 people have needed hospital care.

Hepatitis A has been well known to scientists and the medical community for decades, and syphilis for centuries. The fact that both of these diseases have treatments—and for hepatitis A, a vaccine exists—raises the pertinent question: how are these diseases able to reemerge in the most advanced capitalist country in the

world in the 21st century?

Both illnesses have taken hold almost exclusively in poverty-ridden areas and within some of the most vulnerable social layers. In Oklahoma City, the first identified victims of syphilis were found at the local juvenile detention center, which reported three cases—a boy and two girls, the youngest, 14. The center had not had a syphilis case in seven years of testing for it.

A few months later, a prison inmate tested positive. Looking into the origin of the outbreak, investigators discovered that the spread was largely caused by the opioid epidemic, as many users trade sex in exchange for heroin or methamphetamine. The syphilis outbreak has also been tied to gang activity, which is heavily associated with the opioid trade and drug abuse in the area. These conditions make the disease difficult and dangerous to track and contain.

The hepatitis A outbreak in Southern California also has origins associated with social conditions. Officials have reported that the overwhelming majority of the victims are drug users, and also homeless people. The virus, which impairs liver function and causes jaundice, nausea and fatigue, is primarily spread through food or water contaminated by fecal matter, but can also be spread by intravenous drug use. With limited access to resources needed for basic hygiene, the homeless are very susceptible to hepatitis A.

Both Los Angeles and San Diego counties have large homeless encampments and severe drug abuse problems. San Diego's homeless population has grown some 40 percent since January 2014. The largest encampments of the homeless in San Diego, the 8th largest city in the US, are miles away from the nearest 24-hour public restroom. Such facilities have been increasingly shut down to drive the homeless population away from gentrified areas.

Two restrooms in Fault Line Park, where the homeless often congregate to get out of the sun, were shut down months ago, although the city is paying the park's developer \$1.6 million to keep them clean and open.

The profit system has not only created the conditions in which such horrors erupt, but it cannot offer any viable solution to solving these afflictions. Doctors, many of whom haven't seen a case of syphilis since the late 1990s, often misdiagnose the disease, the lab testing procedure is now antiquated and there has been a shortage of the antibiotic, made only by Pfizer, for over a year.

In response to the hepatitis outbreak in Southern California, officials have proposed setting up a number of hand-washing stations throughout the city's most affected areas as a "solution" to the public health crisis. There is no serious discussion by officials in the affected areas of the dire social conditions that have given rise to these outbreaks.



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