



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: THE OPIOID CRISIS

What are opioids?

Opioids are a class of pain-relieving drugs, including both illegal and legal drugs. Illegal drugs include heroin and, when used recreationally, fentanyl. Legal opioids, available by prescription, include oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), codeine, and morphine. Opioid pain relievers can be safe when taken for short periods and as prescribed by a doctor; they produce a sense of euphoria and relieve pain. Over time, however, the brain builds up a tolerance and the effects of the drug lessen. More is needed to produce the euphoric and pain-relief effects.¹ Consequently, opioids are easily misused and highly addictive.

What is the opioid crisis?

The number of opioid overdose deaths have skyrocketed in recent years.² Shockingly, opioid overdose is now the leading cause of death for Americans under 50.^{3,4} Blue Cross Blue Shield estimates that from 2010 to 2016, the number of people diagnosed with an addiction grew by 493 percent.⁵ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) similarly estimates that more than 63,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2016 and more than half of all opioid deaths involves a prescription drug.⁶ Four out of five new heroin users started by using prescription painkillers.⁷

Is the opioid crisis connected to Medicaid growth?

Opioid abuse accelerated in the early 2000s and jumped dramatically starting in 2010. Over that same time period, able-bodied adult enrollment in Medicaid more than doubled.⁸ After ObamaCare's Medicaid expansion, the opioid crisis continued to grow while the number of able-bodied adults on the program grew even higher, now topping 28 million.⁹ And even while spending on opioid addiction skyrocketed in 2014 after ObamaCare's Medicaid expansion began, overdose death totals have continued to climb.¹⁰ Medicaid may not be the sole cause of the opioid crisis, but the data clearly shows it has exacerbated the problem.

Will expanding Medicaid help addicts get treatment?

Medicaid expansion has not proven to be a solution to the crisis in states that have tried it. In fact, for many addicts, expanding Medicaid could worsen the outlook. Many gain access to these addictive drugs through prescriptions and the CDC notes that Medicaid recipients are prescribed opioids two times more often than those not on



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: THE OPIOID CRISIS

Medicaid. Those same Medicaid recipients are up to six times more likely to experience a fatal opioid overdose.¹¹ Medicaid is not the answer to the opioid crisis.

Are opioid deaths higher in ObamaCare expansion states than non-expansion states?

According to data from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), overdose deaths rose nearly twice as fast in ObamaCare expansion states between 2013 and 2015 than non-expansion states.¹² Even worse, overdose deaths are increasing faster in states that expanded Medicaid. The top five states in opioid-related deaths are West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island—all expansion states.¹³ In West Virginia, 71 percent of those that died of overdose deaths in 2016 were on Medicaid the year they died.¹⁴ Instead of throwing more dollars at Medicaid, policymakers should focus on targeted substance abuse treatment in their states.

Can further drug restrictions help?

Some states have implemented caps and limits to prohibit doctors from overprescribing opioids. These strategies may help prevent people becoming newly addicted from prescription opioids. But many prescription drug abusers switch to illegal drugs from the black market when they can no longer gain access to opioids through their doctor; this includes extremely dangerous drugs like heroin and fentanyl. Some treatments that Medicaid pays for, like methadone and suboxone, are also particularly prone to abuse and illegal trafficking.¹⁵

How is the Medicaid system being abused?

Schemes to scam the Medicaid program include a variety of strategies which abuse the system. One of the ways this happens is through a series of bad incentives rooted in the Medicaid system.¹⁶ For example, Medicaid co-payments can run as low as \$1 for oxycodone, which can be sold on the street for up to \$4,000.¹⁷ In a January 2018 report from the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, it was reported that at least 1,072 people had been convicted or charged since 2010 for improperly using Medicaid to obtain prescription opioids.¹⁸ Notably, there was an 18 percent increase in the four years after Medicaid expanded (2014-2017) compared to the four years prior (2009-2014).^{19,20}



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: THE OPIOID CRISIS

Furthermore, in 2012, the average income of a household with a federal minimum wage earner was \$53,000. This is because most minimum wage earners are young and secondary earners.

Admittedly, it is very difficult to live or support a family on a federal or state minimum wage. But thankfully, most minimum wage earners are not trying to do this in the first place.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: THE OPIOID CRISIS

SOURCES

¹ Opioid Overdose, Center for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/index.html>

² Holly Hedegaard, Margaret Warner, and Arialdi M. Miniño, "Drug overdose deaths in the United States, 1999–2016," National Center for Health Statistics. (2017), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db294.pdf>

³ Shiela Kaplan, "C.D.C. Reports a Record Jump in Drug Overdose Deaths Last Year," The New York Times (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/03/health/deaths-drug-overdose-cdc.html>

⁴ Josh Katz, "The First Count of Fentanyl Deaths in 2016: Up 540% in Three Years," The New York Times (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/02/upshot/fentanyl-drug-overdose-deaths.html>

⁵ "America's Opioid Epidemic and its Effect on the Nation's Commercially-insured Population," Blue Cross Blue Shield (2017), <https://www.bcbs.com/sites/default/files/file-attachments/health-of-america-report/BCBS-HealthOfAmericaReport-Opioids.pdf>

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Drug Overdose Death Data: 2015-2016 Death Increases," <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html>

⁷ Christopher Jones, "Heroin use and heroin use risk behaviors among nonmedical users of prescription opioid pain relievers," Drug and Alcohol Dependence (2013), [http://www.drugandalcoholdependence.com/article/S0376-8716\(13\)00019-7/pdf](http://www.drugandalcoholdependence.com/article/S0376-8716(13)00019-7/pdf)

⁸ Jonathan Ingram and Nic Horton, "A Budget Crisis in Three Parts: How ObamaCare is Bankrupting Taxpayers," Foundation for Government Accountability (2018), <https://thefga.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/A-Budget-Crisis-In-Three-Parts-2-6-18.pdf>

⁹ (Ibid.)

¹⁰ Lisa Clemans-Cope, Marni Epstein, and Genevieve M. Kenney, "Rapid Growth in Medicaid Spending on Medications to Treat Opioid Use Disorder and Overdose," Urban Institute (2017), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/91521/2001386-rapid-growth-in-medicaid-spending-on-medications-to-treat-opioid-use-disorder-and-overdose_2.pdf

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Overdose deaths involving prescription opioids among Medicaid enrollees: Washington, 2004-2007," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (October 30, 2009), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5842a1.htm>.

¹² Letter from Ron Johnson, Chairman, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. & Governmental Affairs to Daniel R. Levinson, Inspector Gen., U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, United States Senate (2017) [https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-07-27-RHJ%20to%20Levinson%20\(HHS%20OIG\)%20re%20Medicaid-Opioids.pdf](https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-07-27-RHJ%20to%20Levinson%20(HHS%20OIG)%20re%20Medicaid-Opioids.pdf)

¹³ Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Drugs for Dollars: How Medicaid Helps Fuel the Opioid Epidemic," United States Senate (2018) <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018-01-17%20Drugs%20for%20Dollars%20How%20Medicaid%20Helps%20Fuel%20the%20Opioid%20Epidemic.pdf>

¹⁴ "DHHR Releases 2016 West Virginia Overdose Fatality Analysis," West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (2016), <https://dhhr.wv.gov/News/2018/Pages/DHHR-Releases-2016-West-Virginia-Overdose-Fatality-Analysis.aspx>

¹⁵ Deborah Sontag, "Addiction Treatment with a Dark Side," The New York Times (2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/health/in-demand-in-clinics-and-on-the-street-bupe-can-be-savior-or-menace.html>

¹⁶ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Unintended Consequences: Medicaid and the Opioid Epidemic," United States Senate (2018), <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/unintended-consequences-medicaidand-the-opioid-epidemic>.

¹⁷ Letter from Ron Johnson, Chairman, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. & Governmental Affairs to Daniel R. Levinson, Inspector Gen., U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, United States Senate (2017) [https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-07-27-RHJ%20to%20Levinson%20\(HHS%20OIG\)%20re%20Medicaid-Opioids.pdf](https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-07-27-RHJ%20to%20Levinson%20(HHS%20OIG)%20re%20Medicaid-Opioids.pdf)

¹⁸ Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Drugs for Dollars: How Medicaid Helps Fuel the Opioid Epidemic," United States Senate (2018) <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018-01-17%20Drugs%20for%20Dollars%20How%20Medicaid%20Helps%20Fuel%20the%20Opioid%20Epidemic.pdf>

¹⁹ (Ibid.)