



Photo from Dan Gleiter/PennLive

PORTSMOUTH OHIO AND THE U.S. OPIOID EPIDEMIC

UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL #3

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

POSSIBLE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Who is affected by the opioid epidemic? How are people and communities affected differently?
- What are the factors that led to the U.S. opioid epidemic?
- How does the opioid epidemic compare to other drug epidemics?
- Is the opioid epidemic primarily a criminal issue to be dealt with by the police, or a health issue to be dealt with by the medical community? What do I think, and why?
- What are some possible solutions to the epidemic? What are some possible unintended or negative consequences of these solutions?

BACKGROUND

In 2017, the opioid epidemic killed 63,617 people in the United States. In Ohio, there were 4,854 overdose deaths in 2017 (most of which were opioid or synthetic opioid related), a 20% increase from 2016.

Portsmouth is a city of about 20,000 people and is located on the southern border of Ohio. This small city is considered to be the “epicenter” of the current Opioid drug epidemic in the United States. Many trace the origin of this epidemic to

the high unemployment in the region and the many physical labor based industries that made the community vulnerable to “pill mill” pain clinics that opened in high numbers in the city.

One of the doctors who operated these pill mills, possibly the most infamous in the epidemic, is Paul Volkman. Paul Volkman worked in several pain clinics in Portsmouth where he over prescribed painkillers and several other types of medications starting in 2003. His prescriptions are linked to 11 overdose deaths. In 2004, Volkman’s Oxycodone (a prescription opioid painkiller) orders were 96% of the orders from all doctors in Ohio. In 2012, Volkman was sentenced to 4 life terms in prison for his crimes, but the impacts of his actions continue to ripple throughout the United States. Many experts predict we have not even reached the peak of the Opioid epidemic.

An epidemic is a widespread outbreak that affects a community during a short period of time. The opioid epidemic specifically refers to the rapid increase in the use (and the consequences of that use) of a certain type of drug called opioids. In the United States, the misuse of and addiction to opioids is considered to be an epidemic because of its impact on public health as well as on social and economic welfare.

Opioids make up a class of drugs that all work in the same way—they interact with specific receptors in the human body, especially in the the brain. When opioid drugs travel through your body, they attach to opioid receptors in your cells. When they attach to opioid receptors in your brain, you experience a reduced perception of pain and an increased perception of pleasure. Problems can occur when people take opioids too often or for too long. At this point, the withdrawal symptoms are extremely difficult and painful. People may eventually feel that they cannot live without the drug—in other words, they become addicted. With excessive use, the body becomes used to the drug, and more and more drug is needed to have the same effect. Higher doses of opioids slow breathing and the heart rate. If the dose is too high, this can lead to death.

So how did opioid use get to be an epidemic? Opioids and opioid addictions have been harming individuals and communities long before it was declared an epidemic. But, in the 1990s, the medical and pharmaceutical communities began paying more attention to helping patients who suffer from chronic pain, and opioids seemed like a wonder drug. Production and promotion of opioid drugs by pharmaceutical companies as a safe and non-addictive option increased dramatically and doctors prescribed these drugs at higher than ever rates. At the time, the risk of addiction to prescription opioids was not given enough attention nor sufficiently understood.

We now know that these drugs were overproduced and over-promoted by pharmaceutical companies, over-prescribed by doctors, and overused by patients. And, the risk of addiction was severely underestimated. Limiting access to prescription opioids is an incomplete solution as it has led to increased use of dangerous street drugs like heroin. Questions about how to safely prescribe opioid drugs, how to limit the supply of illegal opioid drugs, how to effectively address chronic pain, and especially how to treat addiction all must be answered in order to address the nation’s opioid epidemic. Communities all over the United States are struggling to address their unique needs in the epidemic, and Portsmouth continues to counteract its infamous label as the epidemic epicenter.

RESOURCES

Personal Stories

- * [‘American Fix’ and the path out of the opioid epidemic \(Forbes\)](#)
- [American Fix \(Ryan Hampton\)](#)
- [Personal Stories from the Opioid Crisis: Michael Gray \(Energy and Commerce\)](#)
- [Personal Stories from the Opioid Crisis: Devon Hott \(Energy and Commerce\)](#)
- [Rx Awareness - Real Stories \(CDC\)](#)
- * [Addiction Doesn’t Always Last a Lifetime \(NY Times\)](#)

Portsmouth + greater Ohio

- [Opioid Epidemic in Ohio - Extension in Action \(CFAES\)](#)
- * [Why Portsmouth, Ohio Became The Epicentre of America’s Opioid Crisis \(CBC News\)](#)
- [The pill mill that ravaged Portsmouth \(Cincinnati Magazine\)](#)
- [Ohio County Becomes Epicenter Of Opioid Epidemic \(MSNBC\)](#)
- [The Opioid Effect: An Ohio Family Rebuilds After Addiction \(Vice\)](#)
- [How the pandemic helped spread fentanyl and drive opioid overdose deaths to a grim new high \(Ohio Capital Journal\)](#)
- * [March against heroin \(Portsmouth Daily Times\)](#)
- * [Plant Portsmouth kicks off community cleanup \(WOWK 13 News\)](#)

Art and Images

- [Art Installation Commemorates Victims of Opioid Epidemic \(WITF\)](#)

Articles

- [Short answers to hard questions about the opioid crisis \(The New York Times\)](#)
- [Opioid history: from ‘wonder drug’ to abuse epidemic \(with videos\) \(CNN\)](#)
- [Children of the opioid epidemic \(The New York Times Magazine\)](#)
- [The poison we pick \(with video\) \(Daily Intelligencer, New York Magazine\)](#)
- [America’s failed response to the opioid epidemic, in one statistic \(with video\) \(Vox\)](#)
- * [Black victims of heroin, opioid crisis ‘whitewashed’ out of picture, report finds \(Chicago Tribune\)](#)
- [The critical group we’re ignoring in the opioid crisis \(Fortune\)](#)

- [Race, the crack epidemic and the effect on today’s opioid crisis \(Chicago Tribune\)](#)
- [Unseen face of the opioid epidemic: drug abuse among the elderly grows \(The Washington Post\)](#)
- * [5 ways to talk to your children about the opioid epidemic \(Atlanta Journal-Constitution\)](#)
- * [The game changers: 12 bold attempts to slow the opioid epidemic \(STAT\)](#)
- * [Spurred by opioid epidemic, new pain drugs may lower the risk of overdose and addiction \(Science\)](#)
- * [A seven-step plan for ending the opioid crisis \(Bloomberg\)](#)

Data & Maps

- [Opioid crisis statistics \(Department of Health and Human Services\)](#)
- [Opioid crisis fast facts \(CNN\)](#)
- [Overdose Deaths Reached Record High as the Pandemic Spread \(NY Times\)](#)
- [The Opioid Epidemic by the Numbers \(HHS\)](#)
- [Overdose Death Rates \(National Institute on Drug Abuse\)](#)

Videos

- [How America’s opioid crisis spiraled out of control \(Bloomberg\)](#)
- [How addiction happens \(PBS\)](#)
- [Former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy on ‘heartbreaking’ opioid epidemic \(The Washington Post\)](#)
- [A community overwhelmed by opioids \(PBS Newshour\)](#)
- [Journalist traces Virginia’s opioid crisis in ‘Dopesick’ \(PBS\)](#)
- * [A Native American Tribe Is Using Traditional Culture To Fight Addiction \(VICE news\)](#)

Websites

- * [The Opioid Crisis \(Learning for Justice\)](#)
- * [Understanding the opioid epidemic \(PBS\)](#)
- [What is an opioid? \(University of Michigan Medical School\)](#)
- [What is the U.S. opioid epidemic? \(Department of Health and Human Services\)](#)
- [Opioid overdose crisis \(National Institute on Drug Abuse\)](#)
- [Investigating the heroin and prescription opioid epidemic: A lesson plan \(The New York Times\) \(with video\)](#)
- [FACT SHEET: Addressing Addiction and the Overdose Epidemic \(White House\)](#)

* = resource includes one or more solutions