



# ISSUE ADVISORY

## What Should We Do About the Opioid Epidemic?

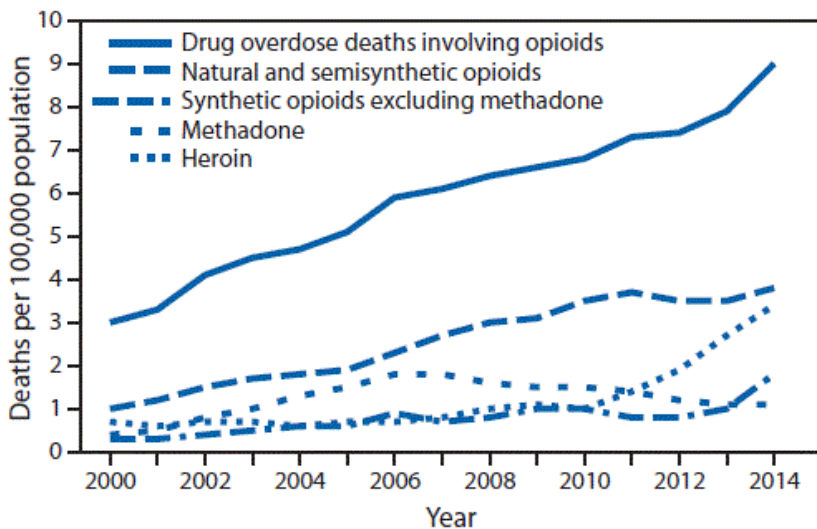
Drug abuse, a problem the United States has faced for decades, has taken a sharp and lethal turn with the rise of opioids—both legal painkillers, such as oxycodone and fentanyl, and illegal ones like heroin.

More than 64,000 Americans were killed by drug overdoses in 2016, according to the Centers for Disease Control, and at least two-thirds of those deaths were caused by opioids. That is worse than the peak of the HIV epidemic in 1995 and more than the number of US combat deaths in the entire Vietnam War.



In the last year, doctors wrote more than 236 million prescriptions for opioids, or about one for every American adult. But many patients became addicted to the painkillers as their bodies began to tolerate higher and higher doses. Others, if they could no longer get prescriptions, switched to heroin; then came the even deadlier fentanyl.

### Drug overdose deaths involving opioids, by type of opioid - United States, 2000-2014



Source: National Vital Statistics System, Mortality file, CDC/NCHS

- “Opioids” include both legal medications, such as oxycodone, fentanyl, codeine, and morphine, and illegal drugs, such as heroin and the black-market forms of legal drugs.
- Drug overdoses (estimated at about 64,000 nationwide in 2016) are now the leading cause of death for Americans under 50, with two-thirds of those deaths caused by opioids, according to the US Centers for Disease Control.
- The Centers for Disease Control estimates that opioid abuse alone costs the United States about \$78 billion a year in medical expenses, lost productivity, and prison costs.

# Framework of Alternative Means of Moving Forward

This issue advisory presents three options for deliberation, along with their drawbacks. Each option offers advantages as well as risks. If we increase enforcement, for example, this may result in many more people in prison. If we reduce the number of prescriptions written, we may increase suffering among people with painful illnesses.

Each option is rooted in a shared concern and proposes a distinct strategy for addressing the problem that includes roles for citizens to play.

## Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death among Americans under 50.

### Option 1: Focus on Treatment for All

This option says that, given the rising number of deaths from opioids, we are not devoting enough resources to treatment to make real headway in turning around the epidemic.

### Option 2: Focus on Enforcement

This option says that our highest priority must be keeping our communities safe and preventing people from becoming addicted in the first place.

### Option 3: Focus on Individual Choice

This option recognizes that society cannot force treatment on people.

### Option 1: Focus on Treatment for All

Given the rising number of deaths from opioids, we are not devoting enough resources to treatment to make real headway in turning around the epidemic. Addiction is primarily a medical and behavioral problem, and those are the best tools for combating the crisis. Treatment should be available on demand for anyone who wants it. At the same time, the pharmaceutical companies that have profited from making and promoting opioid painkillers need to contribute more to the solution.

A Primary Drawback: **This option does little to stop people from becoming addicted in the first place.**

Actions	Drawbacks
Expand the number of treatment centers, especially long-term facilities.	More treatment centers could be located in communities where they could pose problems.
Require that all treatment be fully covered by Medicaid and other health insurance plans.	Treatment on demand will take a huge investment of taxpayer dollars.
Release low-level drug offenders from prison and send them to mandatory treatment.	Releasing low-level offenders will leave addicts free to commit crimes to support their habit.
Require drug companies to put more of their profits into creating less-addictive painkillers.	Requiring new research will drive up the cost of pain medicine, which will hit poor people and seniors hardest.

## Option 2: Focus on Enforcement

Our highest priority must be keeping our communities safe and preventing people from becoming addicted in the first place. Strong enforcement measures are needed, including crackdowns and harsher sentences for dealers, distributors, and overprescribing doctors. Addiction to opioids and other hard drugs brings with it crime and other dangers. Mandatory drug testing for more workers is needed. In the long run, a tough approach is the most compassionate.

A Primary Drawback: **Criminalizes a public health problem and deters addicts from seeking treatment.**

Actions	Drawbacks
Sharply increase law enforcement and sentencing for drug dealing and distributing.	Longer sentences will result in more people in prisons already overcrowded and underfunded.
Increase mandatory drug testing for public employees and teachers.	More testing means drug users will be less likely to try to look for jobs.
Allow police to go through addicts' cell phones to identify dealers.	Police snooping in cell phones is an intrusion into people's private lives.
Make and enforce stricter laws that would limit the amount of opioid pain relief medication doctors can prescribe	This would leave many patients suffering from severe pain.

## Option 3: Focus on Individual Choice

This option recognizes that society cannot force treatment on people. We should not continue to waste money on a failed "war on drugs." Only those who wish to be free of addiction end up recovering. We should be clear that crime will not be tolerated, but if people who use drugs are not harming society or behaving dangerously, they should be tolerated and allowed to use safely, even if they are damaging their own lives. Communities shouldn't spend their resources trying to force treatment on people.

A Primary Drawback: **This option makes addiction seem okay.**

Actions	Drawbacks
Set up community-based centers where people who are addicted can inject drugs safely.	Safe places" could promote and encourage drug use.
Eliminate penalties for using drugs; the police should only pursue dealers.	By only pursuing dealers, there will be no deterrent against individual users.
Offer complete amnesty from prosecution for anyone who seeks treatment.	Drug addicts are an enormous burden on their families and the economy; taxpayers end up supporting them.
Equip all police with naloxone, an overdose treatment drug, and make it available cheaply and without prescription.	Police and paramedics will be treating overdoses when they could be chasing criminals or treating heart attacks.

## Reflections

- What new information or insights did you gain as a result of this exercise?
- What approaches are you most willing to support and why?
- What approaches are you least willing to support and why?
- What do you still need to grapple with? What didn't you talk about?

## Moving Toward Action

- What actions are most likely to have the greatest impact?
- What actions are the most doable?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What will be our next steps?

## Notes

This issue advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation.

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