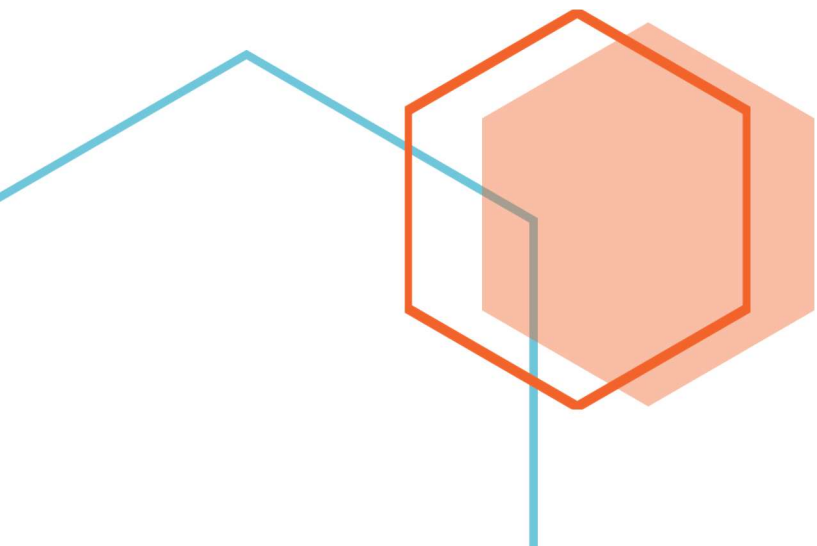




The Mishandling of Monmouth County's Opioid Addiction

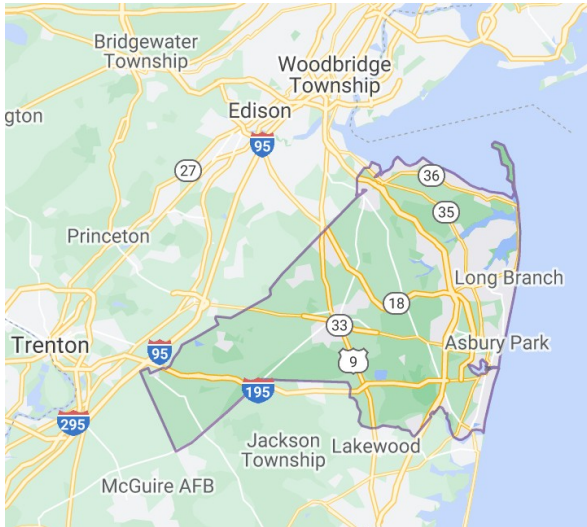
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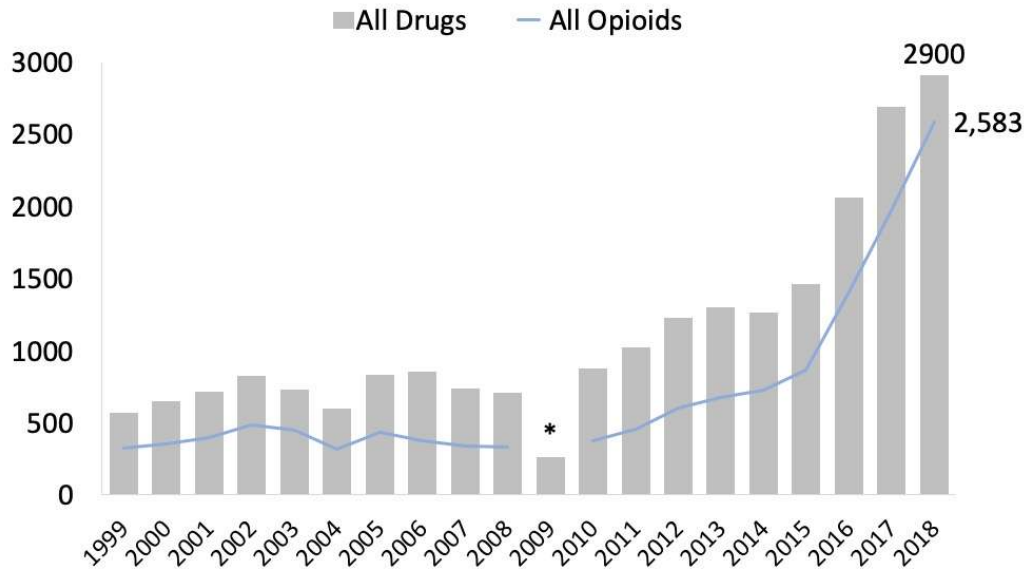
The United States is facing a crisis. Opiates are natural or synthetic drugs that are used to relieve pain. Their chemical structure is similar to that of morphine and leads to addictive highs. Monmouth County, New Jersey is one of the many epicenters of the opioid epidemic here in the United States.



This is a map of Monmouth County, New Jersey, a hot spot of the current opioid epidemic in the United States. This county is located just east of Trenton and Princeton, two major cities in New Jersey.

Google Maps. Google, www.google.com/maps/place/Monmouth+County,+NJ/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x89c3cf078e32ecb3:0x24e4402cc03423a7?sa=X&hl=en&ved=2ahUKEwiO6oHlYz0AhVPm-AKHcSVCPoQ8gF6BAgaEAE. Accessed 9 Nov. 2021.

Monmouth County and New Jersey at large are struggling to handle the crisis at hand. The current justice system has a regimen in place for people who use drugs and are convicted by the state. This plan usually involves programs and rehabilitation centers that do not work for every individual.



This graph depicts the opioid overdose toll over the past couple years in New Jersey.

NIDA. 2020, April 3. New Jersey: Opioid-Involved Deaths and Related Harms. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-summaries-by-state/new-jersey-opioid-involved-deaths-related-harms> on 2021, November 9

Opiate Usage and Its Dangers

Opiates are dangerous drugs that can have even more dangerous side effects. People who use opioids, whether they are bought off of the street or given to the patient through prescriptions from medical doctors. Opiate usage gives the user and immediate, euphoric high that is what typically leads to the formation of addictions.

These opiate addictions typically begin in a doctor's office. Many people get prescribed opiates for pain which leads to them discovering the high that these drugs can produce. Individuals with chronic pain or those who have undergone an intense surgery are prime candidates for accidental addiction (Insurance Journal, 2017). Along with this trend, those

individuals who are naïve to opioid usage, in other words, people who have never used opiates are also at an increased risk for developing a dependency on these substances (Wiese, 2021).

The euphoric highs that are experienced are not the only side effects that opiate users experience. People who use drugs are often characterized by a plethora of physical and emotional symptoms. The physical symptoms can take the form of weight loss, cramping, muscle pain, headaches, and nausea. The emotional and behavioral symptoms can often be just as hard to manage. Emotionally an individual will lack motivation and will be depressed. They will also experience bouts of hyperactivity. Their behavior will often



change, adopting social seclusion, slurred speech, and a loss of coordination.

All of these symptoms are painful and contribute to the overall continuation of the cycle of addiction. These patterns are often the most dangerous effects of drug usage, aside from overdosing. Opiate overdose is characterized clammy face, limp body, blue lips and fingers, vomiting and the inability to wake up. These symptoms are important to know and recognize, especially considering that 90 Americans pass away every day due to an opioid overdose (Bratsis, 2017).

Current Reform System.



The current reform systems in the state of New Jersey include a regimented schedule

of courthouse visits and rehabilitation group homes. These tactics are imposed on convicted drug users by the state and are rarely something the individual will take on for their own sake. In an interview with Suanne Schaad, the director of the Substance Awareness Center at Monmouth University offered some insight into the issue at hand. We discussed how the state of New Jersey's forced, cold turkey tactics are not always the best option for people. In fact, they do not actually help very much at all.

There are however some other options that can be used to aid in one's rehabilitation.

- MAT (Medication Assisted Treatment)
- Risk Reduction Centers
- Therapy
- Groups/Communities

This is a snapshot of the Monmouth County Court House where many people are found guilty on substance charges and also where the state rehabilitation process begins.

Wikipedia.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monmouth_County_Courthouse. Accessed 9 Nov.2021.

Options like medication assisted treatment, or MAT, are often used to help individuals



reach a point where they do not have to use opioid substances. MAT consists of using a different pharmaceutical, like methadone, that are prescribed to the individual to slowly ease them off of opioids. MAT has been shown to be incredibly effective in helping ease the pain of withdrawal and addiction, reducing the individuals need to use other substances. Another benefit is that risk behaviors and crime rates are shown to drop, and social functioning and quality of life go up during these treatments (McElrath and Herman, 2018).

Another option is a facility called a risk reduction center. Risk reduction centers may seem like a completely odd idea when it comes to solving the problem of addiction because they do not necessarily encourage stopping drug use completely. Instead, risk reduction centers will provide ways to reduce an individual's harm or risk of contracting diseases or even overdosing.

The option of therapy or group centered healing allows gives people who suffer with substance abuse a break from the social isolation they feel. It is shown that people who use tend to drive themselves away from other people. As Schaad describes, certain behaviors can push even close

family members away, creating an overall sense of distrust and anger with the world. This painful social life only serves to perpetuate the cycle of substance abuse. Group communities offer the opposite. People who have been in the same position or are just entering recovery themselves offer positive social interactions for each other. These positive interactions with people in the community are known to lead to less cravings and therefore and easier time ceasing their drug use. It should also be noted that the inverse is also true. Negative interactions can lead to an increased rate of cravings and more relapses in opioid use (Christie 2021).

These and other more humane treatments are shown to have a better likelihood of actually helping people with opioid addictions. Rather than forcing people into court mandated programs which have a much lower success rate and serve to shame and embarrass the people who use them. These programs on the other hand empower and assist people with addictions to heal and move forward.

Lending a Hand

In addition to human treatments, like MAT, there are also more ways to support the health and betterment of people with



addictions in our society. One of the best ways to support is to allow for positive social interactions. Having more positive interactions with other people has been proven to reduce cravings among those in recovery (Knapp 2021)

The way to make room for more positive social interactions is to start from the beginning. It is important to educate younger generations, so they are more aware of the situation and a lot less judgmental. It should also be noted that 4.8 percent of high school seniors use nonmedical opioids (Bratsis 2017). This shows that not only would it be beneficial for the greater community, but education would also help this demographic while they are in school because they are already facing opioid usage.

Fighting Overdoses

No matter who the person is, overdoses can be fought with naloxone. Naloxone is a sort of like the EpiPen of overdoses. Naloxone comes in a few forms, but most people are familiar with the nasal spray, Narcan.

This life saving drug was not always so accessible. In fact, many states are still working towards a widespread usage of

naloxone to save lives. Federally, the FDA is debating whether or not to make this substance over the counter grade, meaning anyone could buy it in a local pharmacy. This would help be increasing access to civilians who are naturally closer to immediate overdoses (Creech 2016).

Narcan is now widely available for many New Jersey emergency officials. These trained professionals are not the only people who can get their hands on Narcan. In fact, many civilians are able to go through a course that allows them to legally carry overdose kits and administer Narcan in emergency situations.

Along with more access to naloxone, the recently passed Good Samaritan law creates a safeguard for citizens. New Jersey's last governor, Chris Christie, helped pass this law which in essence allows for bystanders to call the police or EMT's without the fear of getting into intense legal trouble. Naturally, this decreased the vast amount of overdose deaths, especially in younger demographics who feared jail time or legal issues.

For a long time, naloxone was not available for the use it should have. In fact, many states are still attempting to increase the



availability of naloxone specifically for law enforcement and first responders.

A Way Forward

Naturally, there is no perfect solutions to this problem. As the opioid epidemic itself is incredibly pervasive, slipping into every layer of society in some way or another. No one is completely untouched from this problem and that just demonstrates how far reaching the solution needs to be. This proposal has a few layers and steps as described in the previous sections of this paper.

The first step towards a better system that actually would benefit our fellow community members who struggle with addiction is to shift our judicial system. We have to create a system of rehabilitation that actually helps people achieve their goals. This system should definitely take some notes from MAT therapies and risk reduction centers and set some reasonable goals. Getting completely clean in a couple of weeks is not plausible for everyone, and the new system should reflect this. Instead, we should aim to lessen risk and work towards getting clean at the individuals own pace.

After this massive first step, it is critical to lose the stigma that often surround people who struggle with addiction. This would have to start with the education of the local community. The sponsoring of youth and adult programs to not only teach about addiction but also educate on overdose first aid would demystify the whole subject. Stigma comes from not knowing. If the community were to be better educated on this matter, there would be less preconceived notions that linger. This essentially creates a more positive environment for people who struggle with addiction which would lead to more positive outcomes.

The last hurdle is to get community members active in aiding those who struggle with addiction. On top of education, there should be training and more laws to protect people who help in emergency situations where substances are involved. This would help decrease opioid deaths and protect other members of the community.

What Are Our Next Steps?

Get educated! Talk to local and state legislators! Make an effort to understand those who are vulnerable. Even if one person helped with one step, it would make

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a difference in so many lives. Do your part to end the cycle of addiction. Help those in recovery stay on their path and assist others in reducing their risk behavior. Every step is

a major step in the right direction. We must all work together cohesively to reform our rehabilitation system and aid our fellow community members in getting healthy.



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