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## America's Drug Problem and Its Impact

In a nation wrought with gun violence and motor vehicle accidents that seem to happen daily, it should seem shocking to learn that opioids claim more lives in a year than these common incidents do. Drug addiction is talked about, but not enough, and not in depth. Overdose is one of the leading causes of death in America, and it continues to kill even more Americans as the frequency of addiction rises. The United States is a nation unequipped to weather such a storm, and the disaster only grows ever larger because of this. It is a wildfire that hardly anybody is trying to put out.

Opiates are a corrupt business venture for many: for doctors, for drug dealers, for big pharmaceutical companies, for the cartel. There are too many willing customers who fall in too deep, and then can't find the right resources to help them escape their illness. America is dying, and opioids are the unseen poison in the water. Beth Macy digs into this in her book, *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America*.

### **Observation**

Throughout school, I was always told that drugs were bad and to never, ever do them. But as I grew, I began to notice that my teachers and parents seldom ever elaborated on the specifics of *why* we should avoid them. They'd say things like: "drugs are bad, and they'll kill you if you're not careful." I didn't truly understand the impact of what that meant until I moved to Martinsburg, West Virginia.

Interstate 81, often called the heroin highway by the locals, cuts right through Martinsburg. It is a common drug trafficking route. West Virginia is a location Beth Macy talks

about greatly, naming it the drug epicenter of America, and there's a good reason for this. I got to see addiction first hand in all its horrifying glory-- and not just in random people on the streets, but in my high school classmates as well. Addiction is an illness that is nearly impossible to get rid of once it takes a person. Most are simply not strong enough to fight it on their own.

Downtown Martinsburg was not a place we got out of our car at. There were always homeless people milling about, some sitting and rocking back and forth, others slouching up to cars at stoplights begging for money. They were some of the skinniest people I've ever seen in real life, all bones and stringy, greasy hair. They were sick and they were desperate. They didn't answer my father's offers to buy them some food from a drive-thru and bring it back. They wanted only money, and the track marks openly displayed on their arms in the summer sun spoke to why. Looking at them was saddening, because they weren't living any kind of life. Drugs had taken over, and it seemed like people were coming up dead in the paper every other day because of it, many often remaining unidentified.

I only knew one person who died from an overdose, but one was enough. There was a boy in my English class, a straight-A student who completely tore his ACL playing football at the beginning of the school year. He was friends with everyone, and as he healed from his surgery, he took hydrocodone to ease the pain. Hydrocodone that, eventually, ended up taking his life. He gradually lost weight throughout the year, often sleeping in class. He was withdrawn and jittery, and I can still remember my English teacher taking him aside to talk to him about his dropping grades. It seems ironic, looking back, that we were reading Beth Macy's book at the time. He was expelled for his drug use, and died shortly after we went into quarantine. All I could think was that I had *seen* it happen. We all had. He'd been a completely normal student,

just like me or anyone else, but addiction had won out. His name became just another on a long list of lives lost.

What stood out to me most about his situation is the fact that none of the authority figures surrounding us seemed to reach out and help him. The school system ignored the issue entirely, expelling him despite the circumstance of his previous surgery. If more attention had been drawn to his problems, if there had been systems in place for teenagers like him who needed rehabilitation, maybe he wouldn't have passed the way he did. It wasn't talked about in any outright sense. There was no awareness spread, no place for kids to reach out when they had nowhere else to go. He was victim to his addiction, and it was brushed off as just another daily occurrence.

### **Literature Review**

In *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America*, Macy explores “the enormity of America’s drug problem”. (Macy, 2018, p. 5) Her focus is on Opioids, which have become “the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of fifty, at a rate higher than the HIV epidemic at its peak.” (Macy, 2018, p. 5) Her book highlights “two institutions tasked with addressing the opioid epidemic: the criminal justice and health care systems.”

(Macy, 2018, p. 137) And moreover, she goes over how these two institutions have failed and contributed to the growing social problem.

“Americans, representing 4.4 percent of the world’s population, consume roughly 30% of its opioids.” (Macy, 2018, p. 186) Macy admits that this may seem shocking, but points out that “opioid addiction is a lifelong and typically relapse-filled disease.” Remission can be commonly achieved with medicated-assistance for 40% to 60% of opioid users, but sustained remission can take “as long as ten or more years.” (Macy, 2018, p. 45) Active rehabilitation programs are not

only “at a cost far beyond the financial reach” of most addicts, but “rehab isn’t standardized, nor does it often dovetail with what science says is the golden standard for opioid treatment.” (Macy, 2018, p. 238) One interviewed woman, Tracey Mitchell, says that “the whole system needs to be revamped.” Twelve-step rehabs are something the United States is very attached to, though they’re not necessarily effective for the opioid-addicted. (Macy, 2018, p. 174)

More than just the lack of affordability and efficacy is the fact that we live in an enabling society. Doctors and big corporations continue to make money off the selling of these addictive drugs. (Macy, 2018, p. 214) The criminal justice system fails to give jail time to big time drug company executives who plead guilty to potentially dangerous promotional campaigns, and then this same system becomes overworked charging the drug dealers who sell, and prostitutes working for drug money this action produces. (Macy, 2018, p. 96) “America will remain a country where getting addicted is far easier than securing treatment.” (Macy, 2018, p. 9)

Opioids are nothing more than a profitable business venture to so many-- to dealers, to doctors, to big time corporations. Prisons are overpopulated with these addicts and dealers who need rehabilitation, not a sentence they’ll finish out just so they can hit the streets all over again. The death toll will continue to rise as addiction continues to spread if these drugs are not regulated. Accessibility breeds dependency, a dependency America is not doing enough to prevent.

## **Discussion**

Macy’s theory is that America isn’t doing enough to combat the opioid crisis, and that profitability wins out over the greater good. The death toll rises and yet nobody ever seems to do anything about it. Addictive medications are still prescribed at the drop of a hat. Rehabs remain overpriced and not very accessible, most not even effective. Because rehabilitation is so hard to

access, most don't even bother to try. Addicts fall into a hole too deep to climb out of. They'll make it part of the way up only to plummet straight back down to the bottom again with one slip, with no one to throw them a rope.

As long as there is money to be made, drugs will continue to flow. Regular people will become homeless or incapable of functioning properly, too dependent on a harmful substance that will slowly drain the life out of them. Others will continue to work and act as normal, but this drug will control their life from behind the scenes until they eventually self-destruct. Soon, Opioids won't just be *one* of the leading causes of death in America. It will be *the* leading cause, and we'll have done nothing to stop it.

Like Macy says, addiction is an illness. It is not linear. People are unique, and because of this, each one is going to need unique treatment. The same twelve steps, as she said in her book, is not going to cut it for everyone. America fails to accommodate this. It continues to feed this hungry beast that it should be letting starve, and soon addiction will be too big to push back at all. The cartel digs its claws in deeper, and big pharma profits and grows so powerful that it is practically an unstoppable force. And the United States is far from the immovable object needed to stop it in its tracks, or even slow it down.

Macy's method of research is an effective one. It is a mixture of official facts as well as personal experiences gathered from former addicts, current addicts, or the family/friends of addicts. She looks at the issue from several angles and through several sets of eyes in order to reach her readers effectively and from every possible side. A perfect combination of science, to explain the physical effects of opioids on the body and mind. Of statistics, to support and justify her ideas. And of pathos, to help stress the seriousness of the situation to her audience.

With the research Macy has done on addiction, one glaring aspect that stands out to me is that most rehabilitation programs are noted to be ineffective. By the standards of the addicts Macy interviewed, and by her own observation, none of them are up to par with what's actually needed from these courses. Study into what methods are most useful in aiding recovering addicts, and then application of these methods thereafter, could greatly reduce the number of opioid deaths in the United States

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Macy has effectively listed not just the many issues caused *by* addiction, but what issues are causing that addiction in the first place. She has several proposals to try and slow the roll of this problem. Doctors being more attentive, checking in on their patients and not prescribing addictive substances to patients with a history of it in their past or in their family, could significantly drop the death toll. Making rehabilitation programs more common and affordable, maybe even covered under insurance, could save people from this illness in droves. The only problem with this is that to achieve these goals, America has to collectively reach for them. Something it has so far failed to do.

### **References**

Macy, B. (2018). *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Company that Addicted America*. Little, Brown and Company.