

# United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs

## The Question of the Opioids Crisis



<b>Forum</b>	United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs
<b>Issue:</b>	The Question of the Opioids Crisis
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## Introduction

Opioids are a class of drugs which are either derived or mimic natural substances found in the opium plant. Although “Opioids” is the proper term, opioid drugs may also be referred to as opiates, painkillers or narcotics. All Opioids function similarly by activating an area of nerve cells of the brain and body known as the opioid receptors that block pain signals between the brain and the body. Opioids can be prescribed legally by a doctor to relax the body, relieve illness, surgical procedures and injury symptoms including but not limited to post-surgery pain, severe pain due to trauma or disease, coughing and diarrhea. Opioids may be given orally, via a skin patch or injections. However, the question of the opioid crisis comes from the misuse of such drugs as it provides the user a sense of “euphoria” defined as intense feelings of pleasure, rush and excitement; making it highly addictive and dangerous. These non-medical uses can be ingested orally or injected into the veins, raising risks of diseases such as Hepatitis C, and HIV as well as bacterial and fungal infections. Although these drugs can be prescribed legally, there is a strong correlation between medical and non-medical users with one study showing that approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of individuals who use heroin, started with prescribed pain relievers. This crisis is especially lethal considering the new synthetic opioids that have hit the market recently such as fentanyl which is 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin, making it extremely easy to overdose. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 600,000 deaths globally were attributed to drug use, with 80% of these relating to the use of opioids.

Beyond the lethal impact that opioids have on communities, they also cause



economic and social determinants to societies. Families have been torn apart due to addiction, causing many children to enter the foster care system due to parental substance abuse. This puts a great impact on the futures of children who have parents with opioid use disorder. In 2017, an estimated 2.2 million children (about the population of New Mexico) and adolescents had a parent with opioid use disorder (OUD) or had OUD themselves just in the United States alone. This addiction impacts the children of those individuals, exceeding just the impact on the individual. From 2019 to 2021, drug overdose deaths of children between the ages of 10-19 have alarmingly increased by 109% as recorded by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. Furthermore, there are detrimental economic impacts caused by this crisis. In America, in 2018, the cost of opioid addiction (including the value of the lives that were lost were \$696bn or 3.4% of the US GDP). These overdose deaths are also an economic burden to society due to the deaths as well as the emotional toll of families and close ones. The effects of this crisis can be lessened with treatment programs such as MAT (Medication-assisted treatments). This has been proven effective in increasing patient survival rates, decreasing criminal activity related to opioids or other substances and increasing the patient's ability to be employed. Although this method has been proven to be effective, it is estimated that only about 20-30% of individuals with OUD receive this treatment; making the majority unable to access this effective treatment.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Opioids

Opioids are legal and illegal substances that are derived from the opium poppy plant or chemically modified from natural opioids which bind to specific brain receptors and other parts of the body to reduce pain perception and produce feelings of euphoria.



## Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

Refers to the persistent use of substance despite the harm and consequence it causes on the individual and others. In the context of opioids, also referred to as Opioid Use Disorder (OUD).

## The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

A virus that attacks cells that help the body fight off infection, weakening the individual's immune system making them vulnerable to other infections and diseases. Left untreated can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

## Medically Assisted Treatment (MAT)

Defined as the use of medications, in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies, to provide a “whole patient” approach to the treatment of substance use disorders. (SAHMSHA)

## Opioid Crisis

The rapid increase in the overuse, misuse/abuse and overdose fatalities related to opioids.

## UNODC World Drug Report

A comprehensive report created by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime providing annual, detailed information and analysis on the global drug situation, insights on drug manufacturing, trafficking and consumption trends. It also examines the effectiveness of various drug policies and interventions.

## General Overview

### United States of America

The United States is the major contributor to the opioids crisis. According to



the National Institute on Drug Abuse, from 1999-2021, approximately 645,000 people (about half the population of Hawaii) have died from opioid use, including prescription and illegal substances. It has been theorized that the major contributor to the crisis comes from the overprescription of these drugs. In the legal forms of ingesting these drugs, they are prescribed for post-surgical pain or to ease the pain after trauma. 80-90% of postoperative patients receive opioid prescriptions. The misuse and abuse of these opioids are caused by the overprescription by unqualified doctors to ease the pain or cause the feeling of euphoria which leads to an addiction and dependence on it. This addiction can also occur from short term use of these drugs with the statistics showing that approximately 21-29% patients being prescribed opioids misuse them, with 8-12% developing an OUD. The American Healthcare system allows these drugs to be easily prescribed to solve physical problems instead of providing more sustainable solutions such as changing lifestyles, diets, exercise, physical therapy, and stress management to reduce the symptoms. However, these options are more long-term and do not give quick results such as prescription opioids and are more expensive.

Furthermore, as reported by the CDC, there have been three stages to the opioids crisis. Although it initially began with the misuse of prescription opioids, it has developed into the use of rapid increases in heroin overdoses in 2010, marking the second wave of the crisis. This has been detrimental as it has shown the rapid development of substance use disorder and the shift from legal to illegal alternatives to satisfy the users' addiction. This has led to an increase in crime and drug trafficking as well as an increase in the risk of long-term, vital infections such as HIV, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and other bacterial infections using unsanitary needles when injecting the drug. The third wave began in 2013 with the significant increase in overdose death due to the introduction of other synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, which are 50 times more potent, making their dose of fatality smaller.

The opioids crisis has been defined as an “uniquely American Problem” due to the structure of the American government and its healthcare system in which individuals not qualified for the governmental programs must receive private insurance, which



favors the prescription of opioids due to it being cheaper than alternative options such as physical therapy. As the USA does not have a universal healthcare system, they must pay for insurance. Insurance favors opioids to other alternatives due to its smaller costs. Prescription rates in the US are also significantly higher than similarly economically developed countries such as Germany and Canada by 40%. Furthermore, for every 1 million Americans, almost 50,000 doses of opioids are taken every day. This is 4 times the rate in the UK. This lack of universal healthcare further emphasizes how most of this crisis is present in the US.

### Global Crisis

Although the majority of this crisis is in the United States, the impacts of this crisis have been global. The crisis has led to an increase in sexually transmitted diseases through the use of needles and prescription overdoses globally. In Europe, opioids are responsible for approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of overdose deaths. If this crisis is not prevented, there are fears that it might spread globally. Furthermore, different surveys from various countries such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and China revealed that 1/10 students had used prescription opioids for other reasons than their health. This increase in use of these drugs in younger age groups are concerning as it validates the spread of the crisis.

### Women

Women play a significant role in the opioid's crisis. Women are more susceptible to experiencing chronic pain. This increases the likelihood of women and girls being prescribed opioids and experiencing a substance use disorder. Furthermore, women receive more prescriptions for pain medications in cases of domestic and/or sexual abuse than men. Furthermore, pregnant women may take prescription opioids to ease pain related to pregnancy, more specifically postpartum pain. These reasons result in women also being significantly affected by substance use disorder due to prescription opioids. It is important that they should be informed of the risks of addiction to prevent the further increase in misuse in the overall population.



## Children and adolescents

Children are also significantly affected by the opioid crisis. They are more susceptible to developing an addiction due to the underdevelopment of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for impulse control and decision-making, which can lead to the exhibition of addictive behaviors and higher impact of a SUD on the brain. This can be seen in the statistics provided by the Centre for disease control and prevention, stating that in 2018, individuals over the age of 12 and older, misused prescription drugs. Furthermore, Children and adolescents who have parents with an OUD are at high risk of developing OUD themselves, leading to the increase of the opioid epidemic in the population. By addressing these family risk factors, the opioid use within this group can be reduced, relieving some of the impact of the epidemic.

## Major Parties Involved

### United States of America

The involvement of the United States of America stems from the majority of the opioid crisis existing in the US due to different factors. The US medical practitioners increasingly prescribed opioids for pain management as a cheap alternative due to the insurance based non-universal health care resulting in the substance use disorder of these patients. This misuse of easily prescribed opioids led to the use of illegal options such as heroin. Since tackling this crisis, the US has also passed the Controlled Substance Act also known as Title II of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970 which established a federal policy to regulate the manufacturing, distribution, importing and exporting, and use of regulated substances. More recently, The SUPPORT Act was passed by the US federal government in 2018 which aims to assist the citizens in gaining more access to addiction treatment and reducing the quantity of opioids prescribed to reduce the risk of addiction.



## China

China is the major source of the manufacturing of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. These substances are then exported to the US through different channels such as direct mail, smuggling through international shipments and via Mexico. It is especially easy for opioids to be manufactured as for many years, the Chinese government failed to control the distribution of synthetic opioids. Recently, China has taken steps to regulate fentanyl and related substances by adding all fentanyl-related substances to its list of controlled drugs. Furthermore, China has engaged in international efforts to combat the crisis by working with the US authorities to improve the tracking of export and enforcement.

## United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC plays a pivotal role in advocating for international cooperation to tackle the opioid crisis and working with the member states in order to develop and implement drug policies that are effective including the Opioid Crisis. The UNODC further combats the Opioid crisis by working to disrupt supply chains of illegal opioids through intelligence sharing and international cooperation.

## World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization has played a major role in raising awareness in the general, international public on the Opioid Crisis as well as has been in active collaboration with other UN organizations such as the UNODC and the INCB in order to address the threat of synthetic drugs.

## International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)

Established by the UN to prevent addiction and regulate opioid availability for medical use, the INCB has and continues to collaborate with other UN bodies such as WHO, UNODC and UNCND in order to tackle the crisis. The INCB has also written model laws in order to limit the easy accessibility of opioids.





## Timeline of Key Events

### Date Description of event

1970, The Controlled Substances Act categorizes drugs based on their potential for misuse/abuse

1995, The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves OxyContin, a formulation of oxycodone produced by Purdue Pharma

Late 1990s, Pharmaceutical Companies such as Purdue Pharma aggressively market opioids by downplaying their risks of addiction, leading to more prescriptions

2000, Opioids prescriptions peak, leading to an increase in SUD and overdose deaths

2007, Purdue Pharma plead guilty to misleading the public and pay \$600 million in fines

2009, Overdose deaths involving prescriptions opioids quadruple since 1999

2013, Overdose deaths begin to rise sharply due to the synthetic opioids such as fentanyl hitting the illegal drug market

2018, Congress of USA passes the SUPPORT Act for patients

2019, Purdue Pharma files for bankruptcy due to lawsuits related to the opioid crisis

2022, Settlements are made with pharmaceutical companies and distributors of opioids, which resultantly provide addiction treatment and prevention programs with billions of dollars

## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- UNODC World Report 2024
- Enhancing international cooperation in the identification and reporting of new psychoactive substances (UNCND Resolution 56/4)
- Enhancing and strengthening international and regional cooperation and domestic efforts to address the international threats posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids (Resolution 61/8)

United Nations General Assembly Special Session 2016



UNODC Global SMART Program

Advancing effective and innovative approaches, through national, regional and international action, to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the non-medical use of synthetic drugs, particularly synthetic opioids (UNCND Resolution 62/4)

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Over the decades of the opioids crisis several methods have been utilized for the prevention of opioid addiction. One notable example of this has been the creation of anti-opioid advertisements. Created in the 1990s, these ads depicted the desperation that SUD brings to individuals with images of them being depicted to crash their cars slamming into doors etc. However, as also known in tobacco advertisements on their packaging, this method was proven to be unsuccessful even though they highlighted the risk, danger and suffering that opioids bring to individuals who abuse them.

Some methods however have been proven to be useful such as MAT. Expanding access to such treatment programs have been shown to be effective when rehabilitating individuals with an OUD. Such efforts such as increasing the availability of naloxone, an opioid overdose reversal drug have been an important step in combating the crisis.

There have also been lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies such as Purdue Pharma and other manufacturers and distributors due to their misleading marketing campaigns which led to the belief that they had a low risk of addictions, leading to the increase in 1990s and early 2000s. These lawsuits led to settlements that funded various treatment and prevention efforts.



## Possible Solutions

The possible solutions to the opioid crisis vary by covering different bases. Firstly, the access to Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) can lead to lesser rates of OUDs as it has been proven that this method is successful. Furthermore, the increase of availability to overdose reversal medications such as Naloxone to first responders, healthcare providers and to the public can lessen the rates of overdose deaths caused by opioids. These methods of reduction of OUD can lessen the rate of the opioid crisis.

Furthermore, the cooperation between different states in order to regulate the control of import and export of synthetic opioids can be used to reduce the distribution of these narcotics, leading to less fatalities. The methods of control can vary from border control to international drug policy and criminal reforms to stricken the penalty for illegal opioids trading. These legislations can further enforce stricter penalties to those responsible. Additionally, stricter regulation policies of pharmaceutical companies by the enforcement of stricter regulation on marketing and distribution can decrease the overprescription of opioids as well as the abuse of these substances.

Increasing the funding for both treatment facilities and research of non-addictive pain management alternatives can lead to the decrease in prescription of the existing addictive opioids as well as increase the accessibility for individuals already with a Substance Use Disorder to get the necessary support that they need.



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## Appendix or Appendices

- i. **UNODC Opioid Crisis Strategy Flyer:**  
[https://www.unodc.org/pdf/opioids-crisis/UNODC\\_Opioid-Strategy-Flyer\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/pdf/opioids-crisis/UNODC_Opioid-Strategy-Flyer_WEB.pdf)
- ii. **UNODC Global SMART Programme:**  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/SMART\\_brochure\\_2014\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/SMART_brochure_2014_web.pdf)



- iii. **World Drug Report 2023:**  
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html>
- iv. **An article for possible solutions to tackle the Opioid Crisis (Brookings):**  
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html>
- v. **Roadmap to assess and tackle the opioids crisis for states:**  
<https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/1607NGAOpioidRoadMap.pdf>

