

## Understanding Youth Justice and the Opioid Crisis

### BACKGROUND

Not a day goes by without someone dying from an opioid overdose in the United States. According to the most recent estimates reported by the New York Times, opioid overdoses were the cause of nearly 60,000 deaths throughout the United States in 2016, which is nearly a 20% increase from the 2015 overdose estimates. Opioid use can turn to addiction very quickly, and opioid addiction is often initiated through the misuse of opioids prescribed as medication to relieve pain, such as morphine, codeine, oxycodone, and hydrocodone, which are most commonly distributed in pill forms.

Unfortunately, the misuse of prescription pills has led to increased use of the street drug heroin, a slightly stronger form of morphine that can be obtained illegally without a prescription. Although heroin was originally limited to being injected with syringes, heroin has gained more popularity in recent years because it is being offered as a powdered substance that can be snorted, smoked, and even taken in pill form. More specifically, the drastic increase in deaths due to opioid overdoses are a result of heroin being laced with fentanyl, a super strong synthetic opioid that can be 50% to 100% more powerful than morphine.

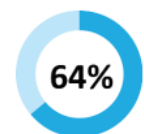
Locally, Connecticut has had a multitude of individuals (including opioid users, their families, and their communities) severely affected by the current opioid crisis. In 2016, over 900 overdose-related deaths occurred in urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout Connecticut. Opioid addiction and opioid-related overdose deaths mostly directly afflicts adults of different ages from all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, making those most at-risk to be caught up in this epidemic more difficult to identify.

### ADDRESSING YOUTH JUSTICE

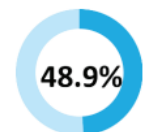
Despite much of the discussion being focused on adults, the drastic increase in opioid addiction and overdoses should spark the attention of those interested in youth justice, delinquency and crime prevention, as well as juvenile justice reform. For individuals who work with at-risk or already justice-involved youth in Connecticut, substance use disorders have been a constant concern for many years. One concern is that addictive behaviors can be an entryway into the juvenile justice system. According to reports on arrest in Connecticut in 2015, there were 8,168 arrests of individuals under 18 years old, and 7% of the arrests came from drug use violations, which are defined as the "unlawful possession, growing, manufacturing and making of narcotic drugs".

Another concern is about the number of justice-involved youth who enter the system with an existing substance use disorder. Researchers who have studied substance use disorders among youth have argued that there are both gender and racial differences regarding drug use patterns. Although young black males make up a disproportionate amount of drug-related arrests based on their representation in the general population, white males have been found to have the highest use of "hard drugs", such as cocaine and heroin. Also, despite all justice-involved youths having a higher likelihood of substance use disorders when compared to youths not involved in the justice system, justice-involved girls have been found to have a higher likelihood of substance use and addiction than

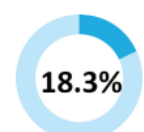
By the time they are seniors:



of high school students have tried alcohol



of high school students have taken an illegal drug



of high school students have used a prescription drug for a nonmedical purpose

Source: (2015) *Monitoring the Future Study*, University of Michigan

justice-involved boys. While these studies did not focus exclusively on opioid use among youth, it is a strong likelihood that increase in adult use of opioid will result in youths and younger adults having increased use as well.

Regardless of youths' drug of choice, the time period surrounding their introduction into the system is crucial for early intervention efforts because youth are six times more susceptible to addiction in adulthood if substance use occurs persistently prior to age 18. Additionally, youths who commit drug offenses are the highest population of juvenile offenders to continue offending into adulthood.

## PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION EFFORTS

The reality is that the adults suffering most from the opioid crisis also represent parents, as well as other family and community members, that youths depend on and interact with in different way throughout their childhoods. Adults hoping to positively influence youth, both inside and outside of the juvenile justice system, are in the unique position to examine when and if the crucial education about drugs is occurring for youths and whether existing efforts for youths are sufficient and effective. This is also an opportunity to connect with youths locally through a conversation about the real dangers of substance use.

In order to address the opioid crisis more directly, Connecticut has passed two new laws in the past two years that are aimed at addressing problems and solutions related to preventing and treating opioid-related overdoses. First, Public Act 16-43 was passed in May 2016. This legislation increased the availability of Naloxone (more commonly known as Narcan), an opioid overdose reversal drug, and addressed many more of the multisystemic issues that complicate opioid addiction. Then, Public Act 17-131 was recently passed in June 2017. The additional legislation calls for facilitating the proper destruction of unused opioid pills, instituting more regulated access to scheduled drugs via the introduction of mandatory electronic prescribing, and limiting opioid prescriptions for minors to a maximum of just seven days.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND ACTION ITEMS

Personnel working with youth should be concerned about the opioid crisis because accessibility to information, both truthful and fictitious alike, are at an all-time high.

Misinformation that is fed to youth can sometimes be more harmful than no information at all, which speaks volumes to the importance of starting a proactive conversation with juveniles on this topic based on facts. Adults who work with youths should also take into consideration the collateral drug crimes that lead to court involvement as part of prevention. They need to change the conversation and understanding of opioid addiction.

Whether you are involved in the juvenile justice system or if you are a concerned adult, numerous resources are available to learn the hard-hitting facts of the opioid crisis. Documentaries like PBS's Chasing Heroin and the CDC's website can provide a full snapshot of statistics and education on the subject. To stay in the loop with Connecticut's opioid crisis and new legislation, local news channels and their websites, along with Governor Dannel Malloy's homepage on ct.gov are well-maintained, resourceful options. If these are matters that you are passionate about or have strong opinions on please do not let the discussion end here. Share this news brief with others in the community and reach out to your local legislators to fully communicate your views and have a voice in the matter.

For more information, feel free to reach out to Dr. Cooper at [dcooper@newhaven.edu](mailto:dcooper@newhaven.edu).

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### Sources:

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*The Tow Youth Justice Institute is a university, state and private partnership established to lead the way in juvenile justice reform through collaborative planning, training, research and advocacy. Please visit our website at [newhaven.edu/tow](http://newhaven.edu/tow) and follow us on social media @towyouth.*



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