

The Opioid Epidemic: How Did We Get Here?

President Trump declared the opioid epidemic a national emergency on August 11, 2017. This is because drug overdoses are the leading cause of death for Americans under 50 years old and overdoses killed more Americans, in 2016, than guns or car accidents.

The opioid epidemic is the deadliest drug crisis in American history. How did this happen? We have heard about this periodically in the news during the past few years, yet it seems as if the issue went from sporadic news coverage to a national emergency overnight. The truth is that this epidemic has been coming for the better part of the last 20 years. Let's go back in time...

In 1996, Perdue Pharma, a pharmaceutical manufacturer, first marketed a crushable version of OxyContin. Perdue Pharma convinced the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that OxyContin had a low potential for abuse because it was extended release. This convinced the FDA...yet I guess none of the approving physicians considered the obvious method of how the pill could be abused: Crush it up, chew it, or shoot it to get an immediate high.

So much for extended release.

It was reported in 2000, *only four years* after OxyContin was introduced, that it was one of the most widely-abused drugs in the country.

Let's fast-forward to 2007. Perdue Pharma, along with three current and former executives, plead guilty to federal criminal charges that they misled regulators, doctors, and patients about OxyContin's risk of addiction and its potential for abuse.

I am not proud that my home state of Florida, in 2010, had 93 of the top 100 Oxycodone-dispensing doctors in the United States. This means that, out of the 100 doctors who prescribe the most Oxycodone pills in the country, Florida had 93 of them in 2010.

You probably know Oxycodone as Percocet.

In 2010, manufacturers shipped more than 650 million Oxycodone pills to Florida — more than 34 pills for every resident of the state.

In 2011, Florida doctors prescribed **ten times more** Percocet *than every other state in the country combined*. In the same year, Florida was responsible for 80 percent of the pain-killers sold illegally in the country.

'Pill Mills' were store-fronts which operated as pain management clinics. Law enforcement agents found license plates from around the country filled Florida Pill Mill parking lots. Lines were commonly out of the door and wrapped around the corner.

...what made it more daunting was that Florida did not have a centralized prescription database—so a person could go from Pill Mill to Pill Mill to get prescriptions and fill them. The typical

prescription was for 200 OxyContin pills and 100 Xanax pills, and this typically cost around 600 dollars (cash only) to complete the process and have the pills in-hand.

Finally, in 2011, Florida instituted a state-wide prescription drug monitoring database; people could no longer 'doctor shop'. Law enforcement concurrently shut down Pill Mills across the state; this halted 80 percent of prescription pain-killers that were sold illegally throughout the country.

The bigger question was, “Where were these pain-killers going **before** the prescription drug monitoring database, and concurrent crack-down on Pills Mills, was implemented in Florida?” Well, we know that they were going out of state. That much was obvious.

The pills were going to small towns, suburbs outside of cities, and throughout rural areas primarily in the eastern half of the United States. This was discovered when the incidence of heroin overdoses sharply increased, in 2012, and has increased each subsequent year.

SO how does Florida’s implementation of a drug prescription database program link to the explosion of heroin use (and overdose) in suburbs and small towns? It is a matter of basic economics, namely the laws of supply and demand. The rest of the country was, *nearly overnight*, cut off from its regular supply of prescription pain killers. This drove the prices of pain killers up to where it became *far* more expensive than heroin, and both drugs contain opioids, so someone who was addicted to pain killers- yet could no longer afford them- could get a fix from heroin.

...and then Fentanyl entered the illegal drug market around 2014. It is 50 to 100 times more powerful than morphine. Fentanyl overdose deaths more than doubled from 2015 to 2016, and overall Fentanyl overdose deaths have increased 540 percent in the past three years.

...which catches us up to where we are, *right now*, in 2017. We are experiencing the deadliest drug epidemic in our country's history. President Trump declared it a national emergency. This all began, in 1996, when Perdue Pharma intentionally misled regulators, doctors, and patients about OxyContin’s risk of addiction and its potential for abuse.

Who benefitted from unleashing this beast on our country? Raymond Sackler, who owns 100 percent of Perdue Pharma, and was the 16th richest person in country in 2015 (according to Forbes magazine).