Are African Americans Being "Whitewashed" Out of the U.S. Opioid Crisis?

Yes, says the Chicago Urban League in a new paper outlining the grim toll of heroin and other opioids on the Black community.

December 29, 2017 By Casey Halter

Are Black people being unfairly excluded from coverage of the U.S. opioid crisis? Yes, says new research from the Chicago Urban League, which outlines the toll of heroin and prescription painkillers on Chicago's Black community, the Chicago Tribune reports.

Titled "Whitewashed: The African-American Opioid Epidemic," the paper reports that although African Americans make up just 15 percent of Illinois's population, they account for nearly a quarter of opioid-related deaths. At the same time, researchers said, African Americans are far less likely than whites to get help for their addiction, largely due to a relative scarcity of addiction treatment facilities in Chicago's primarily Black neighborhoods.

For example, the report found that as of 2015, Chicago had the lowest buprenorphine treatment capacity of any metro area in the Midwest. What's more, the neighborhoods with the highest number of opioid victims in 2016 were found to be on Chicago's South and West sides, areas where Black communities have a strong foothold.

Researchers also noted that much of the public deliberation over the opioid epidemic has thus far focused on white users in rural and suburban areas. The demographic focus is not a coincidence: White people make up nearly 82 percent of opioid deaths in the United States, according to figures from the Kaiser Family Foundation. However, Urban League advocates say that while the narrative and demographic shift has increased awareness of the issue of drug addiction, Black victims are often being overlooked in this particular crisis.

The disparities are also evident in the city's response to the epidemic. For instance, while suburban authorities have reacted to opioid deaths with law enforcement policies that have begun guiding users to treatment instead of jail, the Urban League found that an arrest-heavy approach prevails in Chicago's poor neighborhoods. The report also found that from 2012 to 2016, the highest rates of felony drug arrests were made in areas with high concentrations of Black people; the lowest rates of arrest were in neighborhoods that were primarily white and wealthy.

That said, study authors also noted that city officials are working to expand access to addiction treatment for African Americans in the midst of the crisis. This year, Chicago doubled its funding for medication-assisted treatment on the South and West sides to $3 million. However, some fear that if the state cuts back its Medicaid program, many individuals may not be able to access such therapy. City advocates have also begun working with Chicago police to divert some Black drug users to recovery clinics rather than jail.

The paper ends by arguing that Black people should not be left out of news coverage or public deliberations on how best to tackle the U.S. opioid crisis and that a more universal response should be adopted.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/article/african-americans-whitewashed-us-opioid-crisis