



Inside the Bronx's Overlooked Struggle With Opioid Addiction

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In New York City, the Bronx is waging a massive war against opioid addiction, overdoses and hepatitis C virus (HCV). Yet, local addiction advocates say the minority-dominated borough often gets overlooked in the city's modern heroin crisis, and are pushing to get the borough the public health response it deserves, [The New York Times reports](#).

In a massive feature published earlier this month, the national newspaper overviewed just how intense the Bronx's struggle with heroin, fentanyl and other opioid-related deaths has become. According to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, more Bronx residents died of drug overdoses in 2016 than in any other borough, with deaths increasing from 128 in 2010 up to 308 by the end of last year. Fatal overdoses in the Bronx are at their highest rates since at least 2000, as far back as official data are available. But so far, most local news reports about the opioid epidemic have centered on Staten Island, where the death rate is the highest in the city, and, not so coincidentally, the majority of victims have been white and from middle-class families.

Local addiction and harm reduction advocates say the Bronx has been especially vulnerable to the city's escalating crisis. The area already had a history of high drug use before the modern epidemic began ramping up. And now a growing supply of cheap heroin on the streets and the proliferation of the deadly synthetic opioid fentanyl have begun taking its toll.

Until recently, the Bronx also had a thriving illegal prescription painkiller market. For instance, in one high-profile case, a physician who owned several health clinics (or "pill mills") in the Bronx was convicted of illegally selling millions of addictive prescriptions to residents between 2011 and 2014. The recent surge of heroin in the Bronx in many ways mirrors the surge of prescription painkillers that fueled the opioid epidemic in suburban and rural communities across the country. However, according to several doctors interviewed by the Times, long-standing stereotypes portraying Bronx residents as poor drug users have impeded the local response.

Last year, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio committed \$38 million a year to an initiative aimed at reducing deadly drug overdoses by 35 percent over five years, by expanding government-funded naloxone distribution throughout the city, broadening substance abuse treatment options, supporting local needle exchange sites to avoid the spread of blood-borne diseases and reducing the supply of opioids. However, community organizations working on the ground and local law

enforcement officials say the number of overdoses continues to rise across the city.

In 2016, 1,374 people died from overdoses across the city, up from 937 in 2015. An additional 344 overdose deaths were reported from January to March of 2017, according to preliminary data made available by the Department of Health.

Meanwhile, in the Bronx, outreach workers say the borough needs more resources to combat heroin deaths. The Times feature ends with this poignant quote from Terrell Jones, who works with New York Harm Reduction Educators in fighting back against the his borough's crisis: "It's just color. It's like we're part of a third-world country because we're not part of the so-called privileged people."

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