More than Opioids: The Social Determinants of Drug Overdose and Related Despair in Rural and Small City America

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Objectives

1. Dispel the myth that the drug epidemic is disproportionately rural.
2. Refocus our attention from the individual level to the place level.
3. Caution us against over-focusing on opioids.

Drug Mortality Rates, 2000-2016

Data Source: CDC WONDER, Multiple Cause of Death Files
On Average, Drug Mortality Rates are Not Higher in Rural Areas

Data source: CDC WONDER, Multiple Cause of Death Files, 1999-2016; Rates are age adjusted
Credit: Shannon Monnat, Syracuse University; smmonnat@maxwell.syr.edu
Rural is not monolithic: There is a lot of variation across rural areas

Average Nonmetro County Drug Mortality Rate by Labor Market Type

Notes: includes nonmetro counties in contiguous U.S. with pop>2000; rates are age adjusted; Credit: Shannon Monnat, Syracuse University; smmonnat@maxwell.syr.edu

Opiates are the Largest Contributor to Drug-Related Deaths (when Specific Drug is Identified)

Notes: includes nonmetro counties in contiguous U.S. with pop>2000; rates are age adjusted; Credit: Shannon Monnat, Syracuse University; smmonnat@maxwell.syr.edu

*Opioids are natural or semi-synthetic opioids (e.g., prescription oxycodone, hydrocodone); synthetic opioids include fentanyl
How Did We Get Here? The Spark vs. The Kindling

Opioids were the spark, but you can’t start a fire without kindling.

The Factors that Help Explain Geographic Variation in Drug Mortality Rates

The key connecting force is isolation.

Drug Mortality Rates are Higher in Places with More Economic and Family Distress and Lower in Places with More Opportunities for Community Interaction

Mortality rates are for nonmetro counties, are pooled for 2006-2015, and are age-adjusted.
Credit: Shannon Monnat, Syracuse University, monnat@maxwell.syr.edu
Non-College Educated Whites are Far Less Positive about their Relative Standard of Living than are Blacks and Hispanics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-College Educated Whites</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic Blacks</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic Whites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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“There is no group of Americans more pessimistic than working-class whites.”
– J.D. Vance, Hillbilly Elegy

Landscapes of Despair

“This was not new; it had been happening for fifteen years. And there was more to it than drugs. This scourge was connected to the conflation of big forces: economics and marketing, poverty and prosperity. Forgotten places of America acted like the canaries in those now-shuttered Appalachian coal mines. Just no one in the country listened much until more respectable types sounded the same alarm.”
– Sam Quinones

Disconnection, Dislocation, and Lack of Meaning

Chronic Loneliness Is a Modern-Day Epidemic
We Have to Fix What’s Going on Upstream

“There I am standing by the shore of a swiftly flowing river and I hear the cry of a drowning man. So I jump into the river, put my arms around him, pull him to shore and apply artificial respiration. Just when he begins to breathe, there is another cry for help. So I jump into the river, reach him, pull him to shore, apply artificial respiration, and then just as he begins to breathe, another cry for help. So back in the river again, reaching, pulling, applying, breathing, and then another yell. Again and again, without end, goes the sequence. You know, I am so busy jumping in, pulling them to shore, applying artificial respiration, that I have no time to see who is upstream pushing them all in.”

Where do we go from here?

• We can’t Narcan our way out of this.
• We can’t treat, arrest, or border wall our way out of this.
• The problem is bigger than opioids.
• No single solution, but the key will be collaboration and community.

“The antidote to heroin is not Narcan. The antidote to heroin is community.”
– Sam Quinones, author of Dreamland

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The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of these organizations.

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