

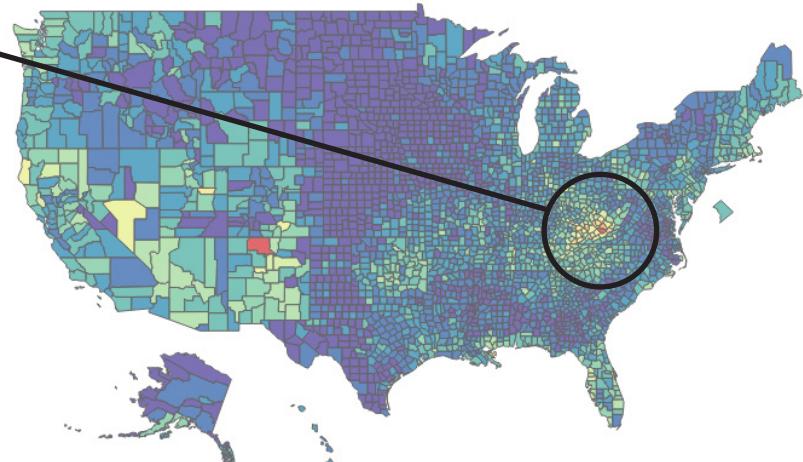
A GLIMPSE INSIDE AN AMERICAN OVERDOSE

Chris McGreal, author of *American Overdose*, shows how a small area of America overrun by opioids, exploited by big pharma, and neglected by politicians, became the epicenter of a nationwide epidemic.

The Williamson Wellness clinic, founded in a small West Virginia town by a former undertaker who used to run a prostitution ring, has begun drawing patients from far and wide as word spread its doctors prescribed large amounts of opioid painkillers on demand.

The clinic sits in the heart of the region that rapidly became the epicenter of the opioid epidemic.

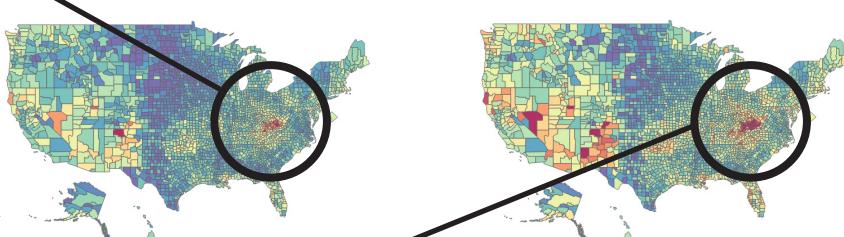
Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, launches a huge marketing campaign for the drug, falsely claiming it is less addictive and more effective than other opioids.



By 2006, Williamson Wellness has attracted the attention of the FBI and West Virginia police, but they struggle to show that mass prescribing painkillers is illegal and the clinic stays open.

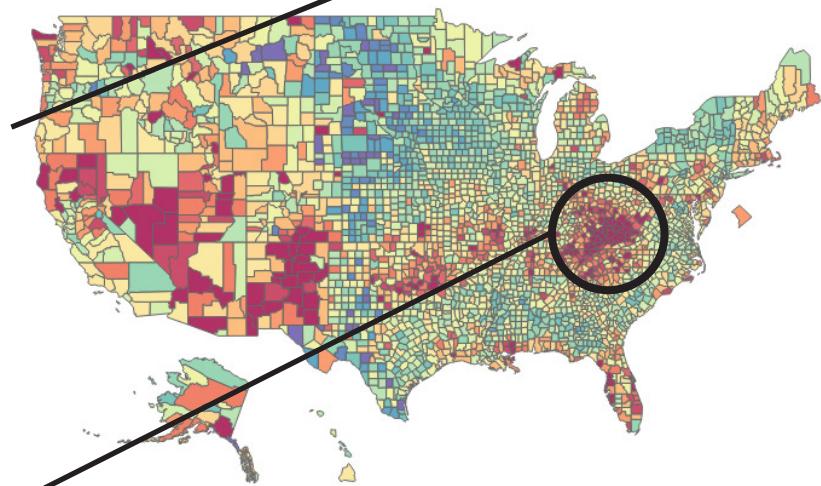
Just north of Williamson, pharmaceutical wholesalers deliver three million opioid pills to a small pharmacy in a Mingo County town of just 400 people.

Purdue Pharma pleads guilty to criminal charges of falsely claiming its drug is less addictive and more effective than other opioids. A CDC official compiles data showing that opioid overdose deaths were escalating far faster than had been publicly acknowledged and calls it an epidemic.



In 2009, Williamson Wellness pulled in \$4.6 million in a town with a population of little more than 3,000 people. The following year, the FBI and state police raid the clinic arresting several doctors for writing prescriptions for patients they have not seen. The agents find hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash lying around. The doctors, who made millions from prescribing opioids on a vast scale, are sent to prison.

The formula for OxyContin is finally changed to make it harder to crush and extract the narcotic, but people already hooked still need a fix and demand for heroin begins to surge.



With the Williamson Wellness clinic closed, and its doctors jailed and stripped of their medical licenses, the trade in illicit opioids has moved on. But the epidemic remains and West Virginia has the highest overdose rate in the country.

Across the US, deaths from heroin overdoses already exceed those from prescription painkillers. In 2016, a powerful synthetic opioid, fentanyl, overtakes heroin to claim the most lives.

Estimated age-adjusted death rates for drug poisoning by county. (Maps provided by CDC)

Legend for estimated age-adjusted death rate (per 100,000 population)

<2	8-9.9	16-17.9
2-3.9	10-11.9	18-19.9
4-5.9	12-13.9	20-21.9
6-7.9	14-15.9	26-27.9

Full high-level timeline on the back 1980-2018

THE MAKING OF A TRAGEDY — A TIMELINE



- 1980** Two doctors at Boston University Medical Center, Jane Porter and Hershel Jick, write a brief letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine* noting a low incidence of addiction in a set of patients treated with opioids. The conclusions are considered highly qualified.
- 1986** Pain specialists Russell Portenoy and Katherine Foley publish a paper challenging the medical community's long-standing aversion to morphine because of the risk of addiction and claiming opioid painkillers are a safe treatment. The paper is based on the cases of just thirty-eight cancer patients. A growing number of pain specialists join the movement.
- 1995** Henry Vinson, a former undertaker and escort, begins recruiting doctors to run what will become one of the most prolific opioid pill mills in his hometown of Williamson, WV.
- 1996** Purdue Pharma releases a new and powerful opioid pill, OxyContin, and unleashes an unprecedented marketing campaign that claims the drug is less addictive and more effective than other narcotic painkillers.
- Dr. James Campbell, president of the American Pain Society, introduces the concept of "Pain as the 5th Vital Sign" alongside other measures of health such as blood pressure and pulse.
- 2000** OxyContin sales rise to \$1 billion a year.
- 2001** Dr. Art Van Zee, who ran a primary healthcare clinic in rural Virginia, warns Purdue Pharma and the Food and Drug Administration that OxyContin is devastating communities in parts of Virginia, Kentucky, and West Virginia. The West Virginia state police launch an investigation into escalating opioid prescribing as coroners report a surge in drug overdoses.
- The Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations requires the nation's hospitals to prioritize pain treatment and pairs with OxyContin's manufacturer, Purdue Pharma, to publish a guide claiming the risk of addiction is low.
- 2002** Dr. Katherine Hoover becomes the most prolific opioid prescriber in West Virginia at the most notorious "pill mill" Williamson Wellness.
- A patchwork of counties in southwestern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and Virginia emerges as the epicenter of the growing epidemic.
- 2003** The FDA warns Purdue Pharma that it is illegally promoting OxyContin in ads that downplay the dangers of the drug. A Government Accounting Office report details the marketing practices in selling OxyContin and its influence over federal regulators.
- West Virginia attorney general Darrell McGraw wins an out-of-court settlement with Purdue Pharma over pushing its drug to doctors.
- The *New England Journal of Medicine* publishes an article by one of the United States' leading pain specialists, Dr. Jane Ballantyne of Harvard Medical School, warning that opioid painkillers do not work as long-term treatment and may even make a patient's condition worse. Her warnings are dismissed as "extreme."
- 2004** OxyContin sales pass \$2 billion a year.
- 2005** Amid growing questions about the dangers of mass prescribing of opioids, pharmaceutical companies establish the Pain Care Forum to shift the focus from addiction to what it claims is an epidemic of untreated pain.
- 2006** A Centers for Disease Control official, Dr. Len Paulozzi, compiles data showing a direct link between rising prescribing and opioid deaths. He describes the crisis as an epidemic.
- The Pain Care Forum attempts to shift the focus by organizing a briefing before members of Congress, "The Epidemic of Pain in America," claiming
- that the real issue is not addiction but people living with pain.
- The high-strength opioid Opana is approved by the Food and Drug Administration three years after its initial rejection.
- 2007** Dr. Charles Lucas, professor of surgery in Detroit, publishes a paper warning that the focus on pain treatment is killing some patients.
- Purdue Pharma pleads guilty to federal criminal charges over its false claims for the safety and effectiveness of OxyContin. Three of its executives are also convicted.
- The country's three drug distributors—McKesson, Cardinal Health, and AmerisourceBergen—flood West Virginia with opioids. They will deliver 780 million doses over the next five years.
- 2009** For the first time, drug overdose deaths outnumber lives claimed by traffic accidents in the United States.
- 2010** Deaths from prescription opioids rise to 16,651 this year. The formula for OxyContin is finally changed to make it harder to crush and extract the narcotic, and some doctors are more cautious about prescribing. But people already hooked on the drugs still need a fix, and demand for heroin begins to surge.
- 2011** The head of the Centers for Disease Control, Tom Frieden, says there is an epidemic of opioid addiction.
- The Institute of Medicine issues a highly controversial report claiming 100 million Americans are living in chronic pain.
- 2012** Doctors write more than 250 million prescriptions for opioids, enough to provide a bottle to every adult in America. The United States consumes more than 80 percent of the world's prescription narcotics.
- 2013** Coroners start to record the first deaths from fentanyl, an artificial opioid fifty times more powerful than heroin.
- 2014** Heroin deaths overtake prescription opioids for the first time. Total drug overdose deaths rise to 47,055. Sales of prescription opioids are now four times higher than in 1999.
- An FDA committee overwhelmingly votes against the approval of a new and powerful opioid drug, Zohydro. The FDA ignores the decision, approves the drug, and creates a political uproar.
- 2016** Fentanyl deaths surge past heroin and prescription opioids, taking more than 20,000 lives. Total drug overdose deaths rise above 64,000—more than all the American soldiers to die in the Vietnam War.
- West Virginia has the highest drug overdose death rate in the United States at 52 per 100,000, nearly double the rate in 2010.
- The CDC issues guidelines discouraging doctors from prescribing opioids.
- 2017** A presidential commission calls the epidemic a "national nightmare" and blames it in part on misselling of opioids and the failure of the FDA and other federal institutions.
- McKesson pays a record \$150 million fine for violating the law requiring the reporting of suspicious orders.
- Endo announces it will stop selling Opana ER under FDA pressure.
- 2018** The CDC estimates that drug overdose deaths rose above 200 a day in 2017, a 13 percent increase over the year before. It calculated that opioids have killed at least 350,000 Americans since 1999.

