The New York Times Examines the U.S. Heroin Epidemic

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As opioid drug use skyrockets across the United States, mainstream media outlets, politicians and public health authorities are starting to focus on new approaches to battling addiction and the nation's war on drugs. Such is the focus of a recent documentary series via The New York Times' Retro Report, a new media nonprofit that aims to "re-examine the leading stories of decades past."

Retro Report's two latest videos, titled "Heroin and the War on Drugs" and "Surviving Heroin"—as well as an accompanying Times editorial—unravel how past approaches to combatting injection drug use in America helped shape today's addiction epidemic, as well as how drastically different heroin use looks today than it did in generations past.

One part of the series overviews the effects of Nixon's 1971 announcement of a "war on drugs," how the AIDS crisis helped raise the stakes of the heroin crisis in the 1980s, and how the early history of harm reduction activism helped prevent both new HIV cases as well as the spread of hepatitis C virus (HCV) among at-risk communities in the '80s and '90s.

The report also delves deep into the modern heroin crisis, reporting that the epidemic is now mainly concentrated in the suburbs and rural America rather than cities, and white people now account for nearly 90 percent of new heroin users. What's more, four in five heroin addicts now say they got hooked on prescription opioid painkillers like Oxycontin (oxycodone) before resorting to injecting the cheaper and more readily available illicit drug.

Finally, the documentary series highlights several government solutions to the current crisis, centered on reversing past drug policies and looking at heroin use as a public health crisis rather than a criminal issue. Featured throughout are the Obama administration's recent decision to increase the federal budget for drug prevention and treatment to $12 billion, the release of thousands of nonviolent drug offenders from the U.S. prison system, and new state laws around the drug naloxone, which can help reverse opioid drug overdoses.

The Times report comes at a particularly poignant time for the U.S. heroin, HIV/AIDS and hep C epidemics. Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports more than 330,000 heroin users across the country—triple the number from 10 years ago. Though HIV rates among injection drug users (IDUs) are on the decline, more than one in four deaths among people

with AIDS in 2012 were attributed to drug use, and as many as 45 percent of young IDUs today are living with hep C.

Overall, The Times reports, the combined epidemics have caused more than six times the total American deaths in all U.S. wars since Vietnam.

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