

The News-Herald

The opioid crisis — this generation's Vietnam? | Opinion

Jacob James Rich

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The Vietnam War was the bloodiest American conflict since World War II. Between President Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of the war starting in 1964 and Richard Nixon's exit in 1973, almost 60,000 American servicemen and countless Vietnamese were killed in action. The controversial war is remembered as a tremendous loss of American life, but a tragedy of far greater magnitude looms in the streets of America today.

In 2016 alone, the opioid crisis claimed more than 42,000 lives in the United States. According to recently published data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Ohio endured the largest burden: 3,613 opioid overdoses—a 34 percent increase from 2015 and 604 more deaths than the next highest state, New York. Total opioid overdose deaths since 1999 were reported at 351,630—a figure that nearly equals Union casualties during the Civil War.

But what caused this unprecedented rise in overdoses? The CDC suspects overprescribing, noting: “The amount of prescription opioids sold to pharmacies, hospitals, and doctors’ offices nearly quadrupled from 1999 to 2010, yet there had not been an overall change in the amount of pain that Americans reported.” Consequently, policymakers have enacted multiple supply-restricting policies, including prescription drug monitoring programs in all states.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich has added to these limitations, restricting doctors’ ability to prescribe opioids for acute pain to a seven-day supply. The new law took effect in Ohio Aug. 31, 2017, and is designed to reduce opiate doses by 109 million per year. Researchers will not observe the policy’s effect on overdoses until the CDC publishes its 2018 mortality data at the end of 2019, but many are concerned about the potential unintended consequences.

Contrary to popular belief, government restrictions have successfully limited the number of opioids prescribed across the country. However, no policy at any level has improved outcomes — the crisis is now much worse. According to ARCOS (Automated Reports and Consolidated Ordering System) data published by the Drug Enforcement Agency, distribution of opioids in the U.S. has decreased 16 percent since 2011—while opioid deaths have almost doubled.

Some researchers suspect that this increase can actually be attributed to the supply-restricting policies, which may compel addicts to substitute their pharmaceutical-grade prescriptions with dangerous black-market alternatives. This idea is supported by the recent explosion of fentanyl- and heroin-related deaths, which now outpace prescription overdoses for the second year in a row — the first time in American history. Addicts and law enforcement report that street heroin is often cooked in makeshift black-market labs from opium and fentanyl imported from Afghanistan and China. Addicts are particularly aware of the black-market dangers and take turns individually “testing” new product, so the entire group does not die from a bad batch.

This suspicion also supports the observed increase in prescription overdoses. It puzzles some policymakers that this phenomenon can persist amid heavy restrictions, but America has witnessed the consequences of prohibition before. When the US outlawed alcohol in 1920, policymakers intended to reduce crime and alcohol consumption. However, crime skyrocketed, and alcohol consumption returned to normal levels after the public located black-market suppliers. It seems that regular consumers of prescription opioids also have located black-market suppliers, but now lack doctor consultation on safe use and oversight.

Regardless of what caused the crisis, there is little doubt that current policies have been a failure. Amid the government's success restricting access to prescription opioids, Ohio has lost more people to overdoses in 2016 than military personnel killed during the entire Vietnam War. Opioid overdoses across the country now outpace firearm-related murders and suicides — combined.

It is time for a different approach.

Editor's note: The News-Herald invites opinion column submissions so all sides of an issue may be aired. Jacob James Rich is a research assistant at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. He is a graduate of Riverside High School in Painesville Township.