

The Distribution of Opioids: An Insider's Perspective

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What is the Opioid Crisis?

The recent "Opioid Crisis" that has become extremely apparent in our society is a major issue and topic of discussion. It is a problem that has impacted the lives of many. According to the *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, there has been a two-fold increase in overdoses per year from 1999-2017 (NIH, 2019). There also was a thirty percent increase in opioid overdoses from July of 2016 to September 2017 alone (NIH, 2019). The trend has been ever-growing since then, becoming a reality that seems to be unavoidable at this point. According to *DrugWarFacts.Org*, an organization devoted to supplying the most up to date facts involving the war on drugs, in 2017 alone, 85.4% of the 1,632,921 reported drug offenses were controlled substance-related (NIJ, 2018). Roughly 21-29% of individuals who are prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse/abuse them (NIH, 2019). Sadly, I also lost my brother to this crisis over this past summer, and that led me to ask the question, "how are these opioids being distributed?". I believe the answer to this question is imperative to understanding the full extent of this problem, and from there this may provide insight on some possible solutions. In this article, I will be discussing the distribution of these opioids, including every parameter needed and the entire process of interaction from supplier to dealer to user.

The Language of Opioids

I would first like to define a few words that I will be using quite frequently in this paper that are important to understand. In this paper, the word "supplier" will refer to an individual who, legally or illegally, is making the transaction with the dealer that provides them the opioids that they are selling. This can be either by legal means (from a pharmacy) or illegal means (from the dark web etc.). The word "dealer" will refer to the individual/s that are making the direct interaction with the user: the one physically giving the drugs to the user. "User" will refer to the individual paying for these opioids in order to consume/ abuse them. The term "Surface Web" refers to any website that can be accessed using the google search engine. "Deep Web" refers to the other ninety-nine percent of the websites on the internet that google does not account for, and "Dark Web" refers to the websites located in the "Deep Web" that are exclusively for nefarious activity. Knowing these

terms and how they relate and differ will be imperative to understanding this article.

How are Opioids Acquired?

One of the most important aspects of this crisis that needs to be understood is how exactly people are getting the opioids to sell in the first place. The answer to this question varies depending on a case-by-case basis, meaning that the individual dealing the opioids has a multitude of methods that can be used to actually acquire these pills. The legal way for them to accumulate these pills is through a prescription-filling of an opioid. The supplier in this case would be the pharmacy and the physician who wrote out this prescription. The dealer would usually get this by either purposefully sustaining a minor injury that would require an opioid prescription, or by pretending to be injured in order to get the pills. It needs to be mentioned that users sometimes do this same tactic as well until they are either refused admittance at the hospital or are not prescribed the drug they are craving anymore. In Tennessee, for example, ER's had to become aware of individuals faking injuries because they received an influx of people coming in complaining about phantom pains who immediately asked for painkillers to alleviate their pains (Bramson, 2017). It is also important to note that there is a concept that is defined as a "pill mill", in which physicians prescribe these opiates for little to no actual purpose (NIJ, 2018). These physicians flood pharmacies with pill prescriptions to make themselves more money.

Another method dealers facilitate to acquire these drugs is through illegal transactions. This aspect is quite complex and needs to be broken down to every specific detail. Getting pills illegally seems to be the more popular, easier, and more efficient way for dealers (as well as users) to obtain opioids; acquiring pills through legal parameters is tedious and for the most part inefficient if there is a need to buy pills in bulk. Illegally, there are two main ways of which dealers acquire these drugs: Either from a local supplier or from a dark web supplier. To break this down even more, dealers will either buy an already pressed pill or they will buy fentanyl baggies (or another opioid) to press into a pill. This process itself will be broken down and discussed later in the paper. Dealers in search of a local illegal supplier do not tend to need to look too far: individuals often post about such things online frequently. Searching through Instagram using keywords such as "pill" and

“sale” (together), I was able to easily find individuals posting about sales and supplying bulk amounts of any kind of drug one could need. This is a process that dealers looking for a local supplier tend to use. They also use word-of-mouth to find suppliers, which tends to be safer and more discreet (for local supplying).

The process dealers conduct in order to buy their product on the “dark web” is fairly simple to an individual who understands technology, but for the average person it may seem complex. I would like to preface this section of the article by stating that this information is coming from my personal experiences of accessing the deep web and my knowledge of how to keep oneself safe and secure on there, as well as a multitude of websites dedicated to “deep web” anonymity. It is not illegal to access the “deep web”, nor is it illegal to keep oneself safe on there; however, it is illegal to purchase “dark web” products or partake in nefarious activity. It is highly recommended that the individual who is doing all of this dark web searching does not use their device on their own Wi-Fi network (they would normally use a public one like a free Starbucks Wi-Fi). Additionally, it is recommended to secure a cheap “burner” computer to do these transactions on. Dealers using the Dark Web first need to download the TOR browser on their computer (or another browser provider) to be able to process “.onion sites”. These “.onion” sites are the sites “too deep” on the web for google to actually have on their search engine (LegitScript, 6). TOR seems to be the most trusted and most efficient way to browse the Deep Web. After downloading the Tor browser, this individual has access to the “Deep Web”. Anyone who has knowledge on the differences between the Surface Web and the Deep Web/Dark Web knows that any accessing of the deep web is potentially harmful for the individual, because there are always hackers and law enforcement tracking and attempting to figure out who is surfing these parts of the internet. To counter this, it is understood that the dealer will install a VPN (Virtual Private Network). This VPN will protect the web searching by encrypting any searches made on the device and not sending the information to the ISP (Internet Service Provider). After downloading the VPN and enabling it, it is also of importance to ensure no programs like JavaScript are running: it is also recommended to keep the screen size of the browser the same size, because any form of minimizing or screen dragging can “individualize” the dealer. Law enforcement agencies have programs that can match online time/ online access with screen size, so the dealer has to be wary of this when he/she/ is accessing this browser. Before doing anything else, the dealer will most likely use the TOR software to make a proxy IP address. This way the dealers’ IP address information becomes somewhat

more secure and anonymous while browsing the Dark Web.

Once all of this is set up accordingly, the dealer must now create what is called a “Bitcoin wallet”. A Bitcoin wallet is an online bank for Bitcoin storage. Bitcoins (along with other cryptocurrency) are the most common form of exchange on the Dark Web. Once having created the wallet, it is recommended the dealer gains access to an “unmarked” Bitcoin, meaning one that is not traceable with the dealer’s identity. The dealer will transfer that coin to the wallet and be ready to make a purchase. The next step in this process is to actually find a website that is a trade source for drugs. The *HiddenWiki.onion* site would provide a site for this. From there, it is fairly simple. A lot of these websites are set up in an Amazon-like fashion, making it easy to find what is needed. If the dealer wishes to buy pills (more than likely pressed), they will be available (Jay). If they wish to buy fentanyl to make their pressed pills, it would be there. The mixers and pressers are also available on these sites, and it is all extremely inexpensive compared to local dealing (Jay). The dealer would just purchase the items he/she wishes to obtain, then ship the item to either their house or a P.O Box of some sort. This process may sound confusing at first to many, but it becomes quite simple for a dealer once he/she becomes accustomed to it. It also tends to be more cost-efficient for the dealer. From here, the dealer would then have their product either ready to sell to a potential buyer, or they would have their fentanyl (or other opioid) ready to mix into their “drug batter” (usually consists of cutters and filler substances). The dealer would then usually have a varying system of pill price based on location and pill availability in the area.

One of the most important and most impactful parts of this entire “Opioid Crisis” are the “pressed pills” and the problem they cause. A “pressed pill” is a pill that was made by an individual with his/her own pill presser, and was not regulated or done under any legal parameter. These pills are arguably the biggest problem in this opioid crisis, for a lot of them are being laced with fentanyl, a highly potent painkiller that can be lethal in even extremely small doses. It tends to be extremely cheap to purchase off of the Dark Web, and it is also readily available in large quantities (pounds can easily be shipped at once). The problem lies in the trend of individuals who are making these pressed pills being sloppy and cutting costs to improve money growth: the people actually making the pressed pills` tend to cut corners to save money, but in turn become sloppy with their end product. There are “proper” mixing machines that would effectively eliminate disproportionate amounts of the opioid being put into these pressed pills, but they are commonly not used

because they cost a decent amount of money. This makes each pill produced a sort of guessing game on how much of a dosage is actually in it: some of the pills in a batch could have a copious amount of the opioid and others could have absolutely none in them. This raises an alarm, for if a person takes any of these pills there could be a lethal dosage in any one of them. Considering individuals who are addicted to these pills will go to any extent to get them, they do not necessarily care where the pill comes from and will not be too keen on asking questions and being safe with each pill they consume, resulting in potential for there to be more overdoses.

The Opioid Crisis from a Different Perspective

This section of this paper will be dedicated to highlighting the important notes of an approximately 37-minute interview I conducted with a local (to my hometown) opioid dealer who goes by the name of "Jay". This interview was conducted via textual messaging back and forth with one another. One of the first questions I made sure to ask him was about his thoughts on the declaration of an "opioid crisis" in the United States. "Jay" responded by sending laughing emoji's and arguing that people should be allowed to do whatever they want to do with their lives. He did admit, however, that it was kind of sad to develop a connection with certain people knowing that they were harming themselves by becoming addicted to his product. I followed that question up by asking if he has witnessed anyone or known of anyone that he sold to who had died as a result of his drugs. He told me no because he would not ever sell anything "tainted" to anyone, and he also tries a sample of each bundle of pills he is delivered. This, he said, ensures that he is getting "quality stuff". He did say that he witnessed a friend of his overdose and die from some tainted pills, and that was enough of a deterrent from buying "bad" products that he ensures now all of his is "good". About five minutes of conversation asking me about why I am writing this paper and discussions on anonymity for him went by, and I finally asked him to take me through his process of getting his product and how he finds people to sell to once he receives his product. "Jay" laid down his exact blueprint (which was basically the aforementioned section on how to buy the opioids online), stating that he buys from his "Dark Web" supplier and has it shipped to an address he was not comfortable saying. He also told me that finding buyers is as easy as "picking his nose". He told me that people are constantly looking for a fix of something in his neighborhood, especially the high school kids who he can charge extra per pill too. I concluded the interview by asking for any thoughts he has on the situation as a whole and how he feels as a dealer. He told me that he sometimes feels bad

for what he does, but he made the argument that people usually only turn to him when physicians and pharmacies will not spoon feed people prescriptions any more. He argued that the lackadaisical system in doctor's offices leaves people addicted to these medications, and from there they attempt to get their fix by any means necessary, and that is where he comes in to help them out. He ended our interview by reminding me of how cruel the world is, and how important he believes the "eat or be eaten" mentality is. He told me that if it was not him selling the drugs in his neighborhood, it would be someone else who might not care as much about the people as he does. He reminded me that he could easily just buy some tainted pills and sell them to people and have them pay the price for it, but he tries to make sure his pills are "good" so nobody overdoses and loses their life. This concluded the interview with "Jay".

This conversation attempts to give the reader an understanding of the specific details in the process of acquiring the opioids, as well as highlighting one of the potential problems that adds to the overall chaos and danger of the crisis. It also aims to highlight the importance of the distribution because understanding the distribution methods of opioids can help law enforcement (as well as the common citizen) be more aware of these events taking place and be more active in preventing this from going on further. After concluding the interview with "Jay", I was given a perspective from the eyes of a dealer and his viewpoint on the entire situation. Although it is important to note that his views do not necessarily reflect every individual who deals these drugs, it seems to be important to have a hands-on look from the mind of an individual who actually distributes these opioids. The opioid crisis as a whole is a serious problem that needs to be addressed with a caution and intricate understanding of all of the aspects that come into play; attempting to swiftly attack this crisis will result in a failure to stop it. Furthermore, it seems to be imperative to understand these distribution methods because knowing how these drugs are distributed can help stop more tragedies from occurring.

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