

Indiana study finds high rate of opiate addiction in newborns

By Jessica Goldstein
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The findings of a study conducted at four hospitals across the state of Indiana during the first six months of this year showed that approximately one in five newborn babies tested were positive for the presence of drugs in the umbilical cord. The babies tested were those deemed at risk for Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). NAS describes the state of withdrawal that infants are born into after becoming addicted to substances in utero.

The data was collected from hospitals that agreed to participate in a voluntary pilot program under the Indiana Department of Health's NAS Task Force, which was created in part to work with healthcare providers in the state to treat and prevent addiction.

The Indiana study found that opiates were the most common cause of the condition. Opiates are highly addictive and are transferred to the fetus from the mother via the umbilical cord.

Babies born to addicted mothers are at an extremely high risk of being addicted themselves. In many cases, they are born shaking and screaming in pain, and tend to have respiratory problems and low birth weights. Babies who are exposed to opiates in the womb are at higher risk for other birth defects, including spina bifida and gastroschisis, in which a baby is born with its intestines partially outside of the body.

The findings point toward the continuous spread of a drug epidemic throughout the state. The opiate epidemic has bubbled to the surface in recent years, after a flood of prescription painkillers was introduced into the market by pharmaceutical companies in the early 2000s. The most infamous of these companies is Purdue Pharma, the manufacturers of the prescription narcotic OxyContin.

The pharmaceutical companies' relentless drive for profits has devastated many of the working class and

poor counties of Indiana. Most recently, it has taken its toll with the outbreak of HIV infections in rural counties, like the one in Scott County in southern Indiana, where opiate abuse has become rampant. The spread of HIV in these counties is attributed to the use of needles to inject drugs, including heroin, but also prescription painkillers like Opana and OxyContin that are crushed into a powder and then injected intravenously.

The opiate epidemic in Indiana is a product of the economic slump that followed the 2008 Wall Street crash. Both the Bush and Obama administrations, backed by a Democratic Congress, enacted bailout measures that rescued the banks and financial institutions at the expense of the lives of workers.

The unemployment rate in Indiana climbed to 7.1 percent directly following the crash. Unemployment soared to a staggering 10.9 percent at its peak in 2009, after a brutal round of mass layoffs.

Indiana is home to a major auto manufacturing sector. Layoffs, plant closings, and wage and benefit cuts followed the 2009 bankruptcy and subsequent bailouts of Chrysler and General Motors, which both have manufacturing operations in the state. The cuts suffered by workers in the auto industry in the years after the bailout, along with those in steel, coal, and other manufacturing and energy sectors, have devastated the lives of many in the working class.

Decades of economic devastation were coupled with the exponential growth in the promotion of prescription drugs. In March 2016, opioids were prescribed at a rate of 1.09 prescriptions per individual in the state. The increase of NAS births attributed to opiates in the state rose sharply in conjunction with the increase in opioids and opiates prescribed for pain. The rates of neonatal withdrawal from opiates rose by 3900 percent in

Indiana between 2000-2010, according to the Riley Network, Indiana's statewide children's health system. During that time, the number of opioid prescriptions increased by over 50 percent nationwide. Indiana saw a very similar trend in prescription rates, according to a report from the state's attorney general.

Drug epidemics like the kind in Indiana are not caused by the personal failings of individual users. They are caused by the desperate situations faced by many who have lost their jobs or incomes, some of whom can find no other way out of the constant state of desperation than through the use of drugs.

But that alone does not explain the opiate epidemic; it is also due to the relentless drive for profit by pharmaceutical companies that aggressively market their highly addictive drugs to doctors, with unscrupulous tactics of false advertising and incentives. The healthcare crisis in the U.S. has created a desperate situation in which many users cannot afford treatment for addiction once they fall victim to it.

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