

Drug companies poured 76 billion opioid pills into US neighborhoods in just six years

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Previously undisclosed drug company data released by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has provided the most comprehensive look to date at the nation's opioid crisis. The database, which traces the path of every single narcotic sold in America—from manufacturer to distributor to pharmacy from 2006 to 2012—has been analyzed in a report by the *Washington Post*.

The data, along with the history of its delayed release, is remarkable in many ways. First, it confirms in the most concrete terms the criminal role played by drug companies in creating the deadly opioid epidemic that now kills 70,000 people a year in the US. The prescription opioid epidemic alone resulted in nearly 100,000 deaths from 2006 through 2012.

According to the database, throughout the documented six-year period in which the drug epidemic was beginning to spin out of control, drug companies poured 76 billion oxycodone and hydrocodone pain pills into US neighborhoods.

This almost incomprehensible number meant that during these years, the companies distributed enough pills to supply every adult and child in the country with 36 pills each per year.

However, the distribution of the pills was not uniform from state to state or from city to city. The state of Kentucky, for example, was flooded with enough pills to give every person 63.3 pills each per year; South Carolina, 58; and Tennessee, 57.7.

West Virginia, the state with the highest opioid death rate during this period, received enough pills to give every person 66.5 pills each year.

Rural areas hard hit

Rural areas were among the hardest hit. In Norton, Virginia, there were enough pills to provide 306 pills per person a year; Martinsville, Virginia, 242; Mingo County, West Virginia, 203.

During the years covered by the database, 2006 to 2012, annual opioid deaths rose from under 18,000 a year to more

than 23,000, with prescription drugs cited as factors in almost half the deaths. The volume of the pills handled by the companies also skyrocketed as the epidemic surged, increasing about 51 percent from 8.4 billion in 2006 to 12.6 billion in 2012.

Since then, overall opioid deaths in the US have skyrocketed. The flooding of markets with prescription drugs, especially in economically depressed areas, spawned increased heroin use and ultimately, along with a number of other factors, led to the current fentanyl crisis that added more than 67,000 to the death toll from 2013 to 2017.

There is no doubt that the top drug manufacturers and distributors are guilty a thousand times over for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people; for the incalculable pain and suffering on the part of those addicted, their children, and their families; for the economic and social devastation the crisis has brought to large swaths of rural America. It has placed an immense strain on healthcare systems, social services, and the foster care system. These companies made billions of dollars off of human suffering.

Complicity of the political establishment

However, the insidious character of this massive operation extends well beyond the drug manufacturers and drug distributors. The drug manufacturers and distributors were able to carry out this operation only because of critical structural support they received from the highest level of the political establishment.

The data revealed Monday comes from an exclusive database controlled and viewable only by the DEA, a government-controlled body supposedly meant to oversee and police these companies. The information to which this body had access is highly detailed, including the name, DEA registration number, address and business activity of every seller and buyer of a controlled substance in the United States. The database also includes drug codes, transaction dates, and total dosage units and grams of narcotics sold.

It is not only the drug companies who have been fighting to keep this database secret, but the DEA along with the US

Department of Justice. The database was only unveiled after a yearlong battle for access to the documents waged by the *Washington Post* and HD Media. What accounts for this secrecy?

The truth is, as with every major industry, the drug corporations routinely buy off politicians to secure ideal business conditions. The DEA exemplifies the fact that the federal agencies supposedly tasked with policing big business—the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration—are under the thumb of the corporations and run political interference for them.

Innumerable facts support this claim. First, despite access to this overwhelming data, over the course of this entire crisis the DEA has taken only the most limited action against these companies, which has resulted in many of them paying a pittance in fees for their crimes.

The Obama administration's role

However, even this minimal oversight was too much for the companies and their counterparts in Washington. As the opioid crisis was erupting, the US Congress was working to eviscerate the oversight powers of the DEA, starting in 2014 and culminating in the Ensuring Patient Access and Effective Drug Enforcement Act of 2016, which passed by overwhelming votes in Congress and was signed into law by then-President Barack Obama.

The main purpose of the legislation was to stop the DEA's Office of Diversion Control from halting drug shipments for unusually large and unexplained sales. For example, when several Walgreens pharmacies in Florida sold more than 1 million opioid pills in a year, compared to a nationwide average of 74,000, the Office of Diversion Control could impose fines and suspend distribution, preventing the drugs from reaching the streets pending the results of an investigation.

The 2016 law effectively ended the ability of the DEA to suspend such orders. Political action committees representing the pharmaceutical industry contributed at least \$1.5 million to the 23 lawmakers who sponsored or co-sponsored four versions of the bill. Overall, the drug industry spent \$102 million lobbying Congress on the bill and related legislation between 2014 and 2016.

At least 46 investigators and attorneys from the DEA, including 32 directly from the Office of Diversion Control, were hired by the pharmaceutical companies after scrutiny of the drug distributors began in 2014.

The intimate connection between these gigantic corporate monopolies and the institutions of state power revealed in the case of opioid drug distributors is the relationship that

prevails across-the-board throughout the capitalist system internationally.

Over the course of the last three years, various lawsuits have been brought against different drug companies. Some have been successful in bringing attention to the issues involved and in securing some monetary retribution from the companies. There are currently dozens of drug companies being sued in federal court in Cleveland by nearly 2,000 cities, towns and counties alleging that they conspired to flood the nation with opioids.

While these efforts rightfully target many of the guilty parties involved in the creation of this crisis, the results of the lawsuits, however "successful," will ultimately do little to repair the damage done by the drug epidemic over the course of the last decade, let alone make whole the families who have suffered the trauma of losing loved ones.

More fundamental than the individuals involved in these crimes is the social system that produces them. The subordination of the political establishment to the private interests of corporations is not a feature of life that will be changed through lawsuits. Rather, the solution to the opioid crisis lies in the mobilization of the working class to take ownership of the for-profit pharmaceutical companies, drug distributors and the entire healthcare industry in order to provide medical care in the interest of human need, not private profit.

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