

# AMERICA'S DRUG CRISIS

Every day,  
**more than 130 people**  
in the United States

VIDEO

GO TO  
WEB VIEW



**die**

after taking a type of drug called

**opioids.**



# Why are so many people using these drugs, and how are families dealing with the loss of loved ones? Read on to find out. BY TOD OLSON

**L**uke Leitwein treasured the times when his brother, Travis, visited. Travis, who was 17 years older, was Luke's hero. He could do backflips on the trampoline, and he'd play basketball with Luke in the yard. Before leaving, Travis would embrace Luke in a big bear hug.

Luke, who is 12, sometimes wondered if something was wrong with his brother. Travis wouldn't visit for months at a time—and when he did come over, his mom would hide all the medicine in the house. Once, Travis asked Luke for \$20. "I didn't know why," Luke recalls.

Then just before Christmas of 2017, Luke found out the reason. His mom came into his



**Luke Leitwein (left) and his brother, Travis**

room at their house in Ohio. She told Luke that Travis had been struggling with drug **addiction** for nearly 10 years. That money he had asked for? It had been for drugs. "She showed me pictures of Travis holding me when I was a baby," Luke remembers. "Then she said I wouldn't see him until I went to heaven."

On December 20, 2017, Travis had died of an **overdose**.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What problem did Luke's brother, Travis, have?

## Pills for Pain

Travis was addicted to opioids [OH-pee-oydz], a class of deadly drugs that includes Vicodin, OxyContin, heroin, and fentanyl. His story is not uncommon. Opioid use has **soared** in the past two decades, and overdoses killed about 130 Americans a day in 2018.

For many people, the doctor's office is where their addiction begins. In the 1990s, drug companies encouraged doctors to prescribe new opioid drugs to treat pain. As a result, doctors gave patients pills like OxyContin, Vicodin, and Percocet. The drugmakers **insisted** these medicines were safe.

Today, we know the opposite is true. Studies

## VOCABULARY

**addiction:** a strong and harmful need to have something (such as a drug)

**overdose:** a dangerous amount of a drug or medicine

**soared:** increased quickly in amount or price

**insisted:** said in a forceful way that does not allow disagreement

**epidemic:** the quick spread of something dangerous among a group of people

show that 10 percent of people who start using opioids have difficulty stopping. Teen athletes go to the doctor with knee injuries. Adults go to the hospital for surgery. They return home with OxyContin or another painkiller—and get hooked. When they run out of the pills, they attempt to buy them illegally.

People who become addicted often end up turning to cheaper, more dangerous drugs like heroin. Luke’s mom saw Travis experience this downward spiral. “The pain pills were \$30 a pill, and he needed three a day,” she explains. “He couldn’t afford it, so he tried heroin.”

**PAUSE AND THINK:** How do most people start misusing opioids?

## Hurting Families

The opioid **epidemic** has affected millions of families—and sometimes parents are the ones struggling with drugs. In fact, more than 2 million kids live with a parent who suffers from drug addiction.

When Kecelia Hill, now 14, was in fifth grade,

“Even though my parents hurt us a lot, we’ll always love them.”

—KECELIA, 14, SHOWN WITH HER BROTHER, KENNY



COURTESY OF FAMILY

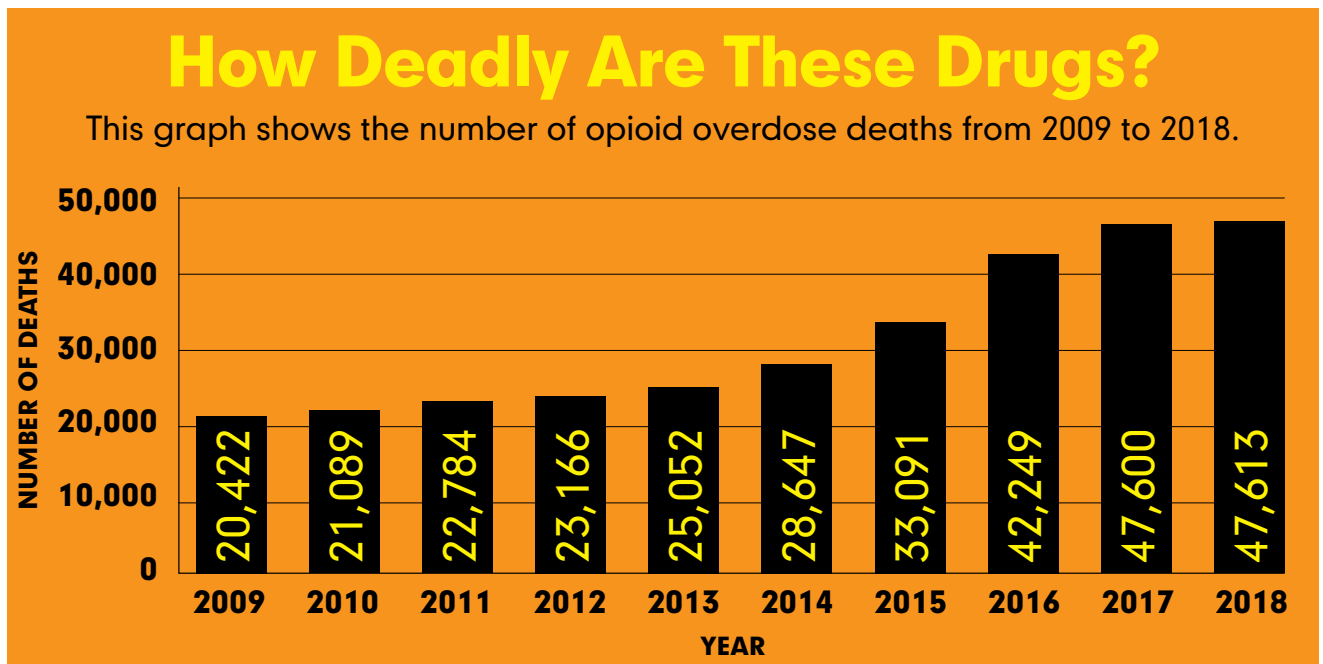
her parents were caught using opioids. Her parents didn’t argue when state officials removed her and her two siblings from their home. “They knew they had screwed up,” Kecelia says.

Eventually, Kecelia’s aunt and uncle took them in for good. “It was really hard,” Kecelia says. “I had to go to school and pretend that nothing was going on.”

**PAUSE AND THINK:** In what ways did Kecelia’s parents’ drug use affect her?

## Lasting Scars

The problem is now getting attention—largely because more people like Kecelia and Luke are sharing their stories. Doctors are prescribing fewer



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

opioids, and police are beginning to regard drug dependency as a disease rather than a crime. In cities like Seattle, people who use drugs are tried in special courts that help them get treatment instead of sending them to jail.

But for family members, addiction leaves a lasting scar. Luke knows that his brother is never coming back. He misses the backflips and the basketball games and the bear hugs. Luke does all

the visiting now—at Travis's grave.

Kecelia still hopes her parents will stop using, but she doubts that she would ever want to live with them again. "I just want them to keep working hard," she says. "Even though my parents hurt us a lot, we'll always love them." •



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What is being done to help end the opioid crisis?



# 5 Questions About Opioid Addiction



**WHAT TO DO:** Answer the questions below. Use full sentences.



1. What are opioids?

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2. Where do many people first get opioid drugs?

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3. Why do people who are hooked on pain pills often start using heroin?

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4. Who is affected by a person's drug addiction?

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5. How are some police and special courts starting to help drug users?

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