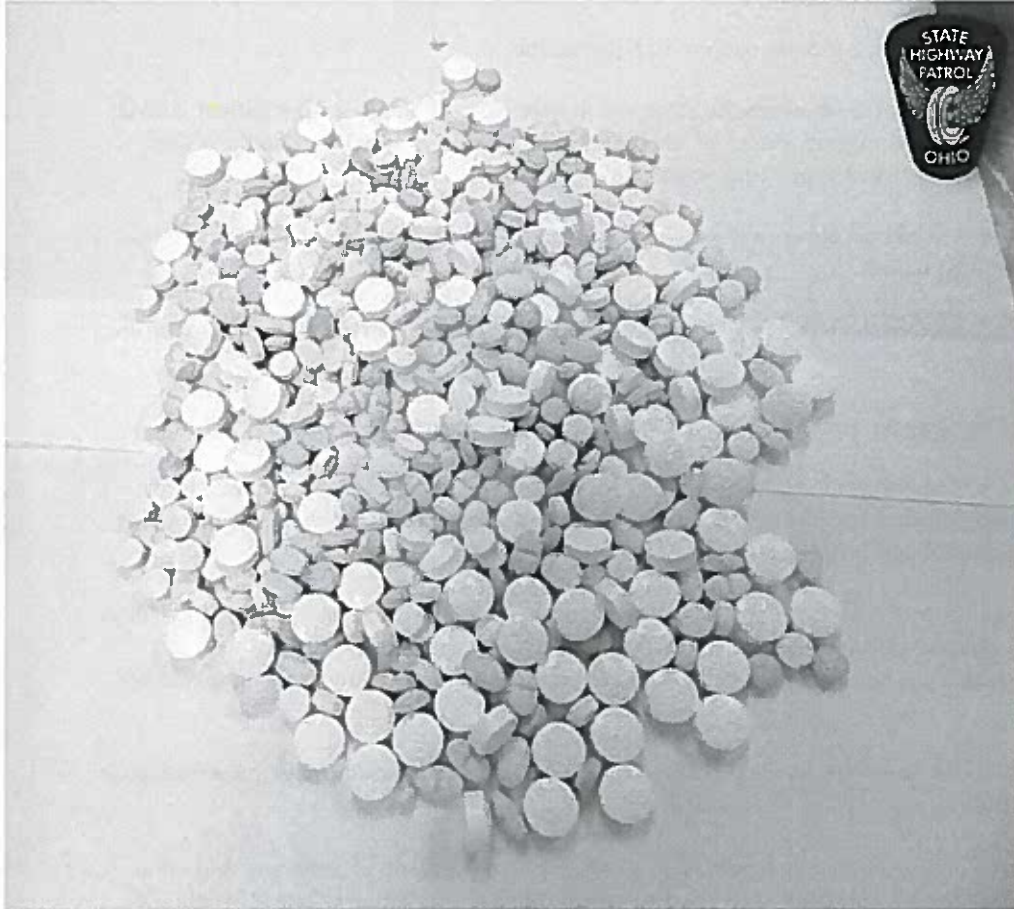


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OxyContin, other narcotic pain pills still plentiful in Ohio



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The State Highway Patrol captured this mix of oxycodone and other pain pills during a raid in June of 2015.

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By Alan Johnson

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Heroin and fentanyl grab the headlines, but narcotic painkillers still fill Ohio medicine cabinets.

Drug-overdose deaths in Ohio continue to soar, with the 2016 toll expected to far exceed the record 3,050 in 2015. Increasingly, heroin and fentanyl are responsible for overdose deaths.

But narcotic pain pills such as OxyContin continue to be a problem. Records show that many Ohioans get dozens of pills a year. Significantly, that's usually the starting point for people who later become addicted to heroin and other hard drugs. Almost no one goes directly to heroin, experts say.

State officials have made strides in slowing the flow of addictive pain pills by increasing law enforcement, toughening state laws and restricting doctors and pharmacists. The Ohio Automated Rx Reporting System, the computer system that tracks how drugs are prescribed and dispensed, shows that 2.6 million people received 11.2 million prescriptions for opioid pills in 2015, the last full year for which statistics are available. There were 684.2 million pills dispensed in 2015, an 11.3 percent drop from 2010.

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OARRS reports legitimate pill transactions, not illegal use.

A deeper dive shows what's happening with pills in Ohio's 88 counties. In the third quarter last year:

- Vinton County: 281,252 pills dispensed, 201.5 per patient, 20.9 per capita.
- Jackson County: 807,620 pills, 194.9 per patient, 24.3 per capita.
- Ross County, 1,663,614 pills, 182.2 per patient, 21.3 per capita.
- Scioto County, 1,737,205 pills, 165.6 per patient, 21.9 per capita.
- Franklin County, 14,850,005 pills, 141.8 per patient, 12.8 per capita.

Small and rural, Vinton County is the unexpected state leader in narcotic pills dispensed per patient. Travis West, director of the Ohio State University extension office in Vinton County and chairman of the county drug task force, said it's unclear why the pill numbers are so high.

"The poverty rate is high here and people are not working," West said. The drug problem has become a big drain on the county's limited budget.

"The ultimate goal of the task force is to pull together agencies, law enforcement and elected officials who are concerned about the problem."

One place the effects of the drug problem shows up in a big way is in the foster care system, West said.

"I was just at a meeting last month, and children's services had more kids in foster care in Vinton County than other counties around us that are a lot larger." About 95 percent of foster cases are the result of parents being addicted to drugs and unable to adequately care for their children.

In Scioto County, the epicenter of the early proliferation of "pill mills," painkillers are harder to get these days and are less frequently abused, said Lisa Roberts, a public health nurse at the Portsmouth Health Department who has tracked the opioid epidemic for years. The bad news is that many users have switched to heroin, she said.

"We were awash in pain pills. They were available to everyone. Now, it's very difficult to get a prescription for painkillers," Roberts said.

Orman Hall, former head of drug addiction programs for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, said Gov. John Kasich's administration has successfully pushed prevention efforts for youth. Of 5,581 Ohio overdoses deaths in 2014-15, just 11 were 18 or younger.

But overdose deaths overall continue rising at a record pace, notes Hall, who now works for the Ohio High Intensity Drug Traffic Area, an agency focused on drug trafficking and money laundering.

"I strongly suspect that some physicians who identify patients exposed to large amounts of opioids are discontinuing treatment due to the suspicion of addiction," Hall said. "Many of these opioid-dependent patients are turning to the illicit drug market which is now dominated by heroin and illicit fentanyl."

Both heroin and fentanyl are cheap (one-tenth the street value of pills) and readily available, he said.

Hall advocates limiting the number of opioids dispensed to patients in the early stages of treatment and "making medication-assisted treatment and other supportive services immediately available to patients who are likely opioid dependent. Those steps will result in fewer deaths," he said.

On the enforcement front, Attorney General Mike DeWine was instrumental in closing pill mills in southeastern Ohio, including Scioto County. DeWine personally went on several of the raids and actively supported legislative efforts to loopholes that allowed some doctors to flood the area with addictive pills.

Increasingly, state and federal regulators are going after pharmaceutical manufacturers and companies that distribute painkillers, holding them responsible for the human and financial toll of addiction. However, Ohio has had no major action on that front since 2007 when then-Attorney General Marc Dann, working with two dozen other states, reached an agreement in which Purdue Pharma Inc. paid \$19.5 million to settle claims of over-aggressive promotion and sales of drugs containing the narcotic oxycodone.

"It's important that drug companies marketing painkiller drugs like OxyContin take into consideration the safety risks involved with the drug," Dann said at the time. "Failing to adequately account for possible abuse of the drug with off-label marketing, not only is it unsafe for Ohio consumers but it also creates an unfair business market."

Kentucky settled with Purdue Pharma for \$24 million last year over claims the company misled the public about its painkiller. Just last week, Dublin-based Cardinal Health agreed to pay \$20 million to resolve claims that it flooded West Virginia with opiates. AmeriSourceBergen, another drug distributor, settled with West Virginia for \$16 million.

Miami-Luken Inc., a Dayton-area drug distributor, is currently in the sights of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, which wants to revoke the company's license. The Washington Post reported recently that Miami-Luken supplied pills to Unique Pain Management, a now-closed Scioto County pain clinic run by Dr. John Temponeras and his daughter, Dr. Margy Temponeras. Both have since been indicted in federal court.

A Miami-Luken attorney told the newspaper the company "strongly disputes the government's characterizations."

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