



Deputy Mike Miller said his job is now dominated by heroin-related calls (Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

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Smackheads in suburbia: On the frontline of America's drugs epidemic where teens buy heroin during lunchbreak

The US in the grip of its worst drugs crisis in history - MirrorOnline joined cops in California to see the horror first-hand

By **Steve Robson**

06:01, 29 Sep 2017

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Night after night it's the same story.



Deputy Mike Miller or one of his team gets a '929' callout over the radio and race to the scene.

Inevitably, they will find a young man or woman slumped in a car, or on a bench outside a fast-food restaurant.

Officially, a '929' means a person who is unresponsive and in need of medical attention - but in Santa Clarita, California, the cops know it usually means only one thing.

Another overdose.

This is a city frequently rated as one of the most desirable in the country with low crime, good schools and high employment.

But heroin overdoses have become so common, the LA County Sheriff's Department recently issued Narcan, a nasal spray which counteracts the effects of an overdose, to every single officer on the force.



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Addicts trying to get clean can leave their drugs in these bins outside Santa Clarita Sheriff's Department, no questions asked ( Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

A single puff into the nostrils can quite literally bring a person back to life.

But how did it get to this point?

MirrorOnline went out on the frontline to find out.

Middle-class misery

In less than a decade, heroin has swept through America, destroying families, friendships, sometimes entire cities.

It began in the struggling working-class communities of the mid-West, but has now extended to just about every state in the country.

California, one of the richest economies in the world, is no exception.

During a rideout around Santa Clarita, Deputy Miller told me heroin has come to dominate his job in the past 10 years.

"It's gotten really big," he said.

"So many kids are using heroin.

"It used to be that we'd get an overdose call once every six months.

"Now we have them at least five to 10 times a month."

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Police swoop on two men taking heroin in a McDonald's car park in Santa Clarita, California ()

Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

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Police call this a 'booger' of heroin - it typically sells for just 10 dollars ( Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

Two friends were spotted using in a car outside a McDonald's at around 4pm in the afternoon.

Inside was a heroin kit in a black pouch - needles, a spoon and what cops call a 'booger' of black tar heroin.

Enough for one hit it can cost as little as 10 dollars (about £7).

One of the men bolted from the scene and managed to evade capture, but the other gave himself up.

After being promised he could speak freely in front of the deputies, he agreed to tell me his story.

Jeff Ruiz was just 33, but could have passed for a decade older.

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Jeff Ruiz said he went from abusing prescription painkillers to heroin, a common story (Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

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He said he is a trained plumber and was leading a successful life until he suffered a serious car accident and was prescribed OxyContin for pain relief.

"The doctor gave me 90 pills a month," said Jeff.

"I was hooked. Then they stopped prescribing it and I got into heroin.

"I hate it. I wish I never started doing this s***.

"It's dirty, it's horrible man.

"It's like a full time job."

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A heroin 'kit' police found in the car – Jeff Ruiz was arrested but his friend successfully fled (📷

Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

Jeff said getting heroin is as easy as a quick phone call and any number of dealers would be racing to deliver it in minutes.

He said he once spent 14 days in rehab, but his insurance wouldn't pay for any more and it wasn't long enough to kick the habit.

"My family don't have the money to help me," he said.

Later on in the shift, Deputy Miller spots a familiar face.

A well-known drug addict who deals to feed his habit is sat in a car acting suspiciously.

As we jump out of the patrol car, a young man who failed to flee in time finds himself trapped by the driver's window looking nervous.

He failed to spot a cop approaching and it's obvious why.

He can't stop scratching his arms, his eyes keep shifting in any direction but straight on.

Deputy Miller says it's more likely he's a 'tweaker', addicted to methamphetamine.

It makes people twitch and shout and hallucinate.

The young man manages to muster a few words then scuttles off before he can get into trouble.

In the driver's seat, the drug dealer is still on probation from his last jail sentence which means Deputy Miller can search his car.

Inside there is another black pouch containing a crack pipe.

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Deputy Miller searches the car of a well-known addict who deals to feed the habit ( Image: Steve Robson/Daily Mirror)

Police give the vehicle a thorough search but only some powder is found.

The dealer is warned to stay clean this time and sent on his way.

In just a few hours, I got a glimpse of the shocking reality of what heroin has done to communities like Santa Clarita.

Drugs are often thought of as linked to poverty and crime.

But here it's a different story.

As Deputy Miller said, there's a mentality of 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

Having started on prescription pills they found in their parent's cabinet, or simply tried heroin because it's so easily available, many families don't want to admit their son or daughter has a problem.

Or before they do realise, it's too late.

The night after our rideout, Deputy Miller's team were called by a man who found his flatmate having overdosed.

The officer first on the scene attempted to use his new Narcan spray for the first time.

But sadly, the 39-year-old victim was too far gone and died before he got to hospital.

Finding a way out

Aged 21, Chris* appeared to be developing into exactly the kind of well-rounded young man his parents had always hoped he would become.

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But secretly, his life was beginning to unravel thanks to a \$1,000-a-week heroin habit.

What started as an experiment with friends, developed into a dangerous addiction.

Chris told me he was smoking the drug from the moment he woke up until the moment he slept every day.

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Student Chris managed to hold down a university course, two jobs and a heroin habit ( Image: Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

In between university classes, he was either rushing to get another hit to stop himself being sick, or selling drugs to pay his debts.

One day he got caught pushing pills and found himself charged with possession.

He rang his parents from prison and confessed all.

Thankfully, Chris' family could afford to put him in rehab for 60 days.

He kicked the habit and has been clean for four years.

Chris now volunteers as a counsellor for a California charity called Because I Love You (BILY).

It was set up by founder Dennis Poncher to help parents struggling to cope with their childrens' behaviour.

And in recent years, the most common problem has been what to do when your child has drug

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The US is in the grip of its worst drugs crisis in history.

Opioid overdose deaths have quadrupled since 1999.

These drugs are now killing 91 Americans every day - more than guns, HIV and skin cancer combined.

Opioid is the umbrella term for pain-relieving drugs such as codeine and morphine which come from the opium poppy flower.

But the most deadly and addictive is heroin.

The drug which ravaged inner-cities in the 70s has now exploded in the US.

And this time it's given rise to a new breed of addict - the suburban smackhead.

Total overdose deaths in US (2002-15)

Those who abuse heroin are now overwhelmingly white and often from middle-class homes.

They are the sons and daughters of lawyers, living in smart mansions and going to university, but sneaking out for a hit of heroin between classes.

Recently, a slew of horrific videos have emerged of police or bystanders finding addicts strung out and close to death.

In one disturbing clip which went viral, two men were found having overdosed on heroin in a McDonald's car park in Ohio, and the appalling scene **was streamed on Facebook Live.**

VIDEO UNAVAILABLE

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OVERDOSED HEROIN ADDICT SAVED FROM DEATH OUTSIDE MCDONALD'S

In Indianapolis, police released an image of a 25-year-old mother they found passed out in the driver's seat with a needle still in her hand.

Her baby was wailing in the back seat.

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A mother found unconscious in a car still holding a needle - her baby was in the back seat ( Image: Town of Hope Police Department)

Image: Town of Hope Police Department)

The epidemic can be traced back to a cynical business move by the pharmaceutical industry in the 90s.

Laws on prescription painkillers were relaxed and unscrupulous 'doctors' spotted an opportunity.

Pills such as OxyContin, a chemical cousin of heroin, were handed out by the bucketload, even though Americans weren't reporting an increase in the amount of pain they were suffering.

Belatedly, there was a crackdown - fraudulent doctors were locked up, laws changed and suddenly pills became much harder to get hold of.

It left millions of addicts in need of a new fix to feed their habit.

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Abuse of prescription painkillers such as oxycodone, commonly sold as OxyContin, has spiralled out of control ( Image: Getty)

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This time it was Mexican drug cartels who took spotted a lucrative new market and moved in. According to America's Drug Enforcement Agency, Mexico is now the number one source of heroin found in the US.

Driven by limitless demand across the border, and the threat of bloodthirsty cartel bosses who operate with impunity, Mexican farmers are producing heroin at historic levels.

What happens next? It only gets worse...

Experts think America's heroin crisis is yet to 'peak'.

The number of opioid deaths keeps increasingly sharply year after year.

Drugs now kill more Americans under the age of 50 than anything else.

But the US is absolutely flooded with cheap heroin.

And deadly new synthetics such as fentanyl are spreading at an alarming rate.

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Meanwhile, President Trump has declared the opioid epidemic a 'national emergency' saying "there's never been anything like what's happened to this country over the last four or five years."

But he is yet to come up with a substantive policy for tackling such a difficult issue.

Instead, he is battling with Congress to scrap health insurance for the poor, known as Obamacare, meaning many addicts will get even less help than they do already.

It's a toxic mix.

According to STAT , the death toll could yet reach 250 deaths per day in the US.

By most estimates, the epidemic will kill at least half a million people in the next decade.

To put that in perspective, opioids may wipe out more Americans in 10 years than AIDS has since the 1980s.

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