Geography of Opiate Abuse, Overdose, & Treatment in Tennessee

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Introduction

Opioid addiction and overdose has become a national epidemic in the United States over the past 30 years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 20,000 Americans died from prescription drugs alone in 2014 – far more than alcohol-related car accidents. Of the 20.5 million American adults who had a substance abuse disorder in 2015, 2 million were addicted to prescription pain relievers and 591,000 were addicted to heroin. As early as 2012, an astounding 259 million prescriptions were written for opioid-based pain medications – more than enough to give every American adult their own bottle of pills. Four in five new heroin users went from abusing prescription painkillers to using street heroin because pills from a pharmacy are far more difficult and expensive to acquire than heroin on the black market.

Methodology

The first step to reaching the objective was to download the US Census County shapefile and select the state of Tennessee using the “select by attribute” tool. Fields were then added into the county attribute table indicating the opiate prescription rate and rate of death from overdose data. Socioeconomic data derived from the census bureau was considered; however, our research shows that this problem affects people from all economic strata.

Methodology Continued

A “corners method” hotspot analysis offered the best technique to pinpoint the biggest trouble area in the state. The corners method finds correlations between prescription and overdose deaths in counties adjacent to one another in all directions, rather than simply north, south, east, and west.

Results

Not surprisingly, prescription rates are unusually high across the state, with the exception of most urban counties where more affluent populations and easier access to preventative education and substance abuse treatment exist. Other than Knox County, urban counties had relatively low prescription and overdose rates. Some suburban counties contain high rates of prescription but lower levels of overdose, indicating more accessible treatment centers and more efficient support systems; however, some suburban and rural areas contain numerous counties where prescription and overdose rates soar in parallel.

Methodology Continued

As Figure 1 reveals, we plotted current outpatient and inpatient treatment centers on the hotspots map, using green crosses to represent outpatient support centers and purple crosses for inpatient centers. Currently, 8 out of 9 total inpatient centers exist in Knox County alone.

Results Continued

After researching the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services website, we found that the State is one of only 13 where doctors issued between 96 and 195 opioid prescriptions per 100 people. Campbell and Anderson held the lowest rate at 95.8 and 94.3 prescriptions per 100 people, respectively. The population of Knox county was over three times larger than that of Anderson, Campbell, and Union combined; accounting for its lower prescription rate, while Union county’s population was only 19,000 accounting for its lower prescription rate.

Conclusion

While the opioid epidemic has plagued Tennesseans across the state, the data clearly shows that four counties in a fairly isolated and depressed area in the northeastern region have been significantly affected and have few options for meaningful detox and treatment programs. Outpatient and office-based opioid abuse treatment facilities exist across the region, but they are spatially limited, have low capacities, offer minimal support, and are largely ineffective. The closest inpatient facilities are located only in cities such as Knoxville, Kingsport, and Johnson City, the closest of which can be over an hour away for some residents along the fringes of the region.

We conclude that a portion of the 13.8 million allocated to the state of Tennessee to fight the opioid epidemic should be used to construct a high-capacity, residential inpatient detox and drug abuse treatment center near interstate 75 around Caryville and Rocky Top, where the highest rate of opioid prescriptions are written, and where the highest rate of overdose deaths occur.

Acknowledgments

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Data Sources


*Note: There was a typographical error on the title page of the presentation during Dr. Leventhal’s presentation, resulting in the title being incorrect. The correct title is “Geography of Opiate Abuse, Overdose, & Treatment in Tennessee.”*