

Juneau's heroin heartbreak

Six people have died of heroin overdoses in the Alaska capital since February, reflecting a growing crisis across the state and nation. Some Alaskans, including the police, say the time has come for a new approach.

Michelle Theriault Boots November 7, 2015

First in an occasional series

JUNEAU -- Heroin's grip on Juneau can be felt in ways both plain and subtle.

A decade of rising abuse can be seen in syringes and foil squares dropped on dog-walking paths and in parking lots.

In grandparents raising toddlers their children are too addicted to care for.

In people shoplifting from Fred Meyer, stealing from their own families and writing bad checks to pay for drugs.

But it wasn't until people started dying that Juneau really started paying attention.

Since February, six people have died of heroin overdoses here. Most were under the age of 30.



For a city of 32,000, the one-after-another overdose deaths from heroin have been jarring and heartbreaking. Think of it as the equivalent of 60 in Anchorage, a city roughly 10 times bigger. Imagine it was caused by a kind of defective car, or at the hands of police, says Juneau police Lt. Kris Sell.

"People would be protesting in the streets."



The lives led by the six defy Hollywood stereotypes of hollow-eyed, street corner junkies. For the most part, they were homegrown kids with tight families and dreams.

In September alone, there was [Brenyer Haffner](#), a 26-year-old who was an avid softball player. In his obituary, his parents asked for donations to the softball league instead of flowers.

Then, two weeks later, Brock Eidsness, who had earned a college degree in film production and had worked as a photographer for a TV station.

In a place isolated by its geography, with no way out except boat or plane, almost everyone has a connection to a life muddled by heroin or lost to it.

It's hardly a problem unique to Juneau, said police chief Bryce Johnson. The situation in Juneau mirrors what state public health officials say is a

larger “opiate hunger” in Alaska that is addicting and killing people [at a higher rate](#) than ever before.

Nationally, heroin is at the heart of a deadly resurgence.

Drug overdose deaths were the No. 1 cause of death by injury, killing more people than vehicle accidents or firearms, according to a [Drug Enforcement Administration survey](#) released Wednesday.

And heroin or prescription painkillers were the cause of more than half of overdose deaths, the study said.

Heroin abuse is now considered to be the top drug threat to the nation by police, surpassing methamphetamine, according to the [2015 National Drug Threat Assessment Summary](#).

“Heroin availability is up across the country, as are abuses, overdoses, and overdose deaths,” the DEA said in a summary of the report.

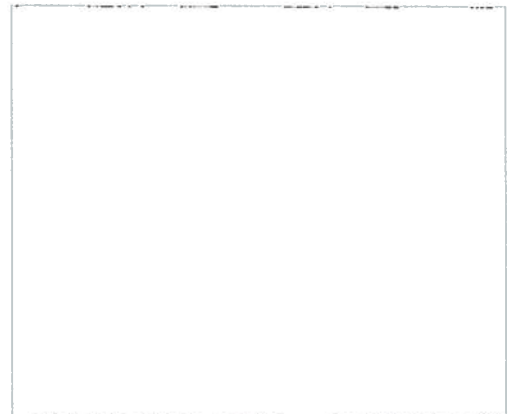
Across Alaska, 29 people have died from heroin in 2015, according to state medical examiner Dr. Gary Zientek. Another nine deaths were officially listed morphine intoxication, usually indicating a metabolized form of heroin.

That means Juneau, with just 4 percent of the state's population, accounts for 15 percent of the year's heroin overdose deaths.

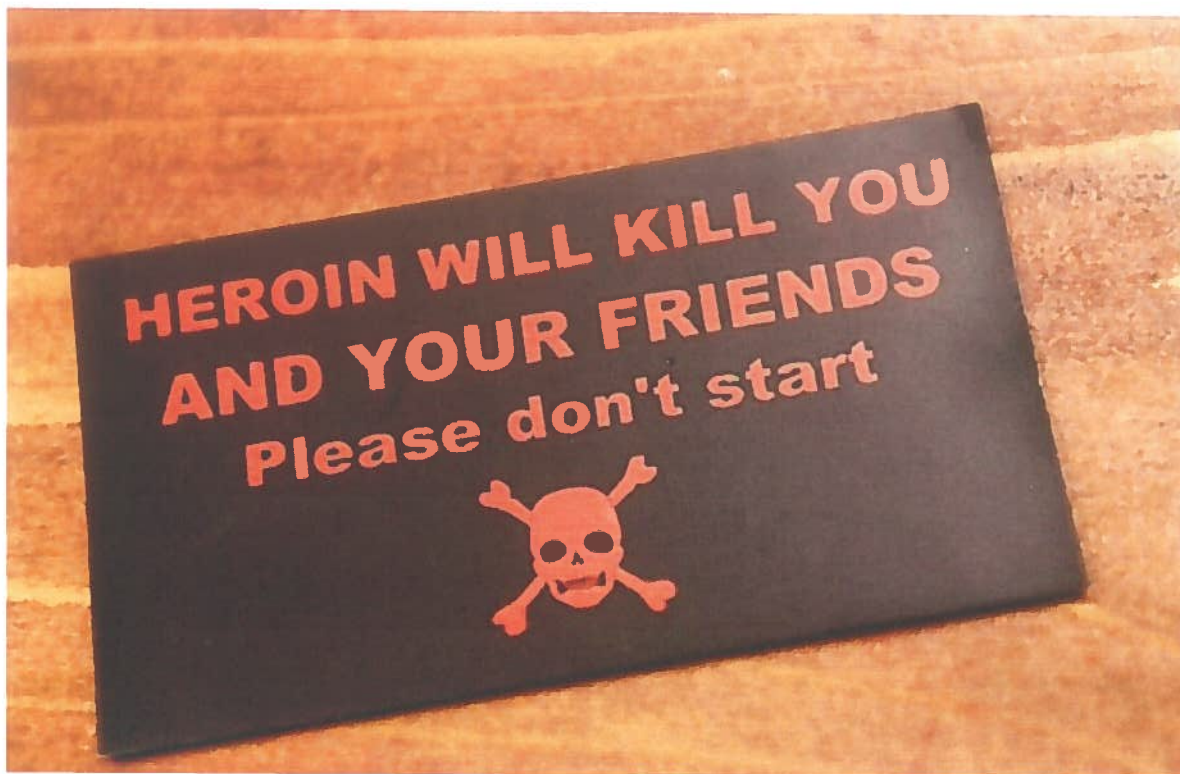
While leaders in rural Alaska say they are seeing more problems associated with the drug, deaths still tend to be clustered in the population centers of the state -- Anchorage, the Mat-Su and Fairbanks.

The deaths in Juneau this year have jump-started the beginnings of a community movement to shut down the drug's grip on addicts and prevent more people from getting hooked.

It includes the police department, which has said, in an unusual move, that it will approach heroin as first and foremost a public health crisis, to families increasingly willing to speaking openly about their loved ones' addictions.



At the same time, people here are also bracing themselves for more deaths to come.



Marc Lester / ADN

Michele Morgan began an awareness campaign in Juneau called Stop Heroin Start Talking, which distributes stickers such as this around town.

Oxy in the parking lot

Recovering addicts, family members of addicts, police and parents in Juneau point to the mid-to-late 2000s as the genesis of today's heroin crisis.

Doctors were dispensing Oxycontin and other narcotic opiates for aches and injuries of all kinds at a feverish pace, they say, and pain pills became something of a high school subculture.

Carloads of teens crushed and snorted them around town, experimenting with a euphoric high.

Sitting in a truck in the parking lot of the Nugget Mall doing Oxys was like sneaking a beer, some former addicts said.

"My friends and I didn't really see it as a drug," said Elisa Evenson, an inmate at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center who is serving a sentence for crimes committed while she was feeding a heroin addiction in Juneau. "It was something you could get from the doctor. It was less taboo."

The pills could be acquired for sports injuries, wisdom teeth extractions or make-believe pains reported at urgent medical care offices. The bathroom cabinets of Juneau were full of legally prescribed narcotic opiates.

"It really felt like the Wild West back then. These drugs were just everywhere. And they were everywhere in the high school," said Sell, the police lieutenant.

"It makes you feel like God"



Marc Lester / ADN

Chantel Epstein tends to her infant son, Jakob, in her Juneau home. Epstein said she supported her heroin addiction with criminal behavior, which led her to prison. Though she has more than five years of sobriety now, her addiction changed her life in lasting ways. "The big impact is that I'm a felon," she said. "I'm never going to get a good job."

Discussions about heroin in Juneau often lead back to the Juneau-Douglas High School class of 2008, the epicenter of a wave of prescription opiate use.

Several of the people who have overdosed in recent years graduated with the class.

Back in the era when the class was attending in high school, the popular kids were popping Oxy's, said Larry Olson, a private substance-abuse counselor who practices in Juneau.

Some told him they were making more money than their parents by selling pills.

Chantel Epstein was part of that class. Today, Epstein is a 25-year-old staying home with her infant son.

In her new-mom uniform of sweatshirt and yoga pants, she could be a barista or a college student. She lives in a dark apartment pressed up against the mountains of Juneau's Mendenhall Valley piled with her son's baby clothes and toys.

Nearly six years clean, she's still sweeping up some of the wreckage she made of her life when she was using.

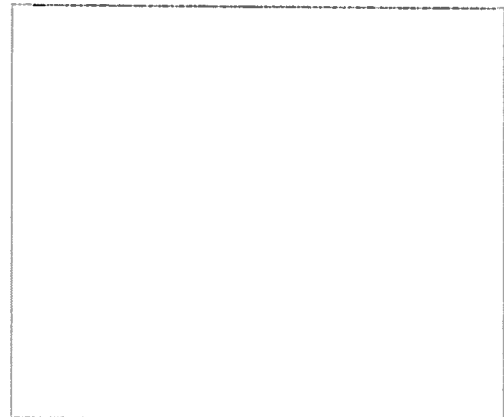
Her dependence on the drug, like other former addicts interviewed for this story who didn't want their names used, followed a familiar trajectory.

She first used Oxycontin on her 16th birthday. Before that she'd never even gotten drunk, she said.

"I tried it, and then after that I lost all control," she said.

In 2009 or 2010, the pills became harder to get in Juneau. The pharmaceutical company that makes the drug reformulated it under pressure from the federal government. It could no longer be crushed for a quick high.

By then, young adults like Epstein were paying \$300 a pill.



Another, much cheaper option was available to fill the void.

Epstein was first introduced to heroin on a trip to Arizona meant to get her sober. Soon she was doing what she said she would never do: snorting and smoking heroin.

For Evenson, the former addict who is now serving time in prison, it was possible to believe that heroin was something she could use casually.

"My form of self-deception was that it was social use."

At the outset, no one would have suspected Evenson was dabbling in the drug.

"I was going to University of Alaska Southeast. I had a really good job," she said. "I had a seemingly perfect life."



Marc Lester / ADN

Elisa Evenson listens during a discussion about prisoner reentry at Highland Mountain Correctional Center in October. Like many heroin addicts, Evenson said her addiction began when she abused prescription painkillers in Juneau years ago. "The thing about my friends and I is we really didn't see it as a drug, because it was something that you could get from a doctor," she said. "It was less taboo." Evenson said she was first arrested in 2005 for her involvement in drug store burglaries.

In Juneau, the line between user and dealer is often fuzzy.

Epstein spent the better part of two years robbing the homes of her family and close family friends, pawning DVD players and jewelry. She cleaned out checking accounts. She shrugged off car accidents. She withered to 98 pounds.

When she was high, she embraced things that repelled her when sober. She loved vomiting.

"(Heroin) makes you feel like God," she said.

Epstein never started using needles, as many heroin addicts do to get a more concentrated high as the addiction progresses and their tolerance increases.

The risk of overdose is far higher when people inject.

"I wouldn't be here today if I had used needles," Epstein said.

Eventually police busted Epstein for an assortment of crimes she committed while trying to feed her habit. Initially, she was charged with 31 felonies.

In jail at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River she faced the excruciating physical reality of kicking the drug.

"I remember so many times just sitting there begging God to take my life because I couldn't go through the withdrawals," she said.

She hasn't used since, she says. On March 19, she'll celebrate six years drug-free.

The heroin days follow her all the same.

She is a convicted felon and paying \$30,000 in restitution to the people she stole from.

Someday she'll have to tell her son, a chubby, smiley 6-month-old, that she is a felon.

"Life is wonderful though," she said. "I have my baby. I have my family."

Some of her friends are still addicted. Recently she tallied all the people she knows who've died.

She counted 23. More than a few are from the class of 2008.

"I always think about our 10 year reunion coming up," Epstein said. "We're going to be missing so many people."

A comeback story with a sad ending

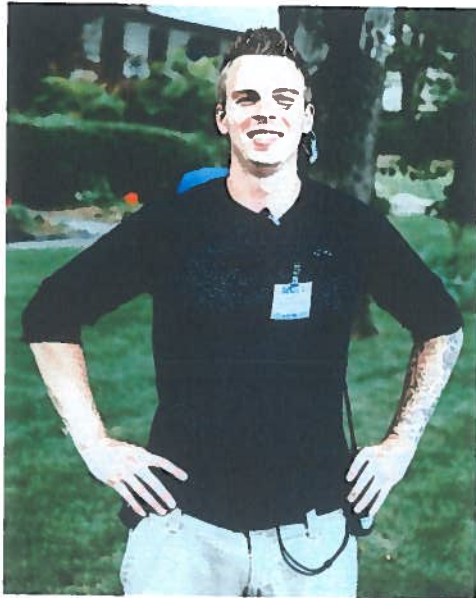
Brock Eidsness was a football player from a big blended family with a goofy, orthodontically perfect grin.

He came of age during the Oxy era, graduating with the class of 2007.

For him, the pills were a quick path to serious trouble.

Eidsness first got Oxycontin from a foot injury, said his sister, Raegan Eidsness-Haugse.

Then a co-worker at a teenage job



Eidsness family photo

Eidsness family photo Brock Eidsness was found dead of a drug overdose in Juneau in September. He had been pursuing a career in film production.

introduced him to heroin and needles. He was 15.

In 2008, when he was barely out of high school, he was indicted on federal drug charges for his role in an Oxy distribution ring operating between California's Central Valley and Juneau.

He ended up going to federal prison for 18 months.

Then Eidsness pulled off a remarkable second act: After serving his sentence, he completed a degree at Western Michigan University, discovering a passion for film production and graduating with honors.

He found work as a cameraman at a Sioux Falls, South Dakota, television station and began dating a news anchor.

Soon his sights were set on the Los Angeles film world. He was proud to have worked his first gig as a production assistant on the set of a feature film this year.

In July a friend died in a boating accident in Juneau, and Eidsness came home for the funeral.

Sometime during his visit home, he slid back into using heroin.



Marc Lester / ADN

Raegan Eidsness-Haugse has lost two brothers to drug overdoses. Her brother Brock Eidsness was found dead in Juneau in September. Now, she says she struggles to sleep, is losing hair from the stress and is looking forward to moving out of Juneau and making a new start.

His sister, who was attending college and working at a local air taxi company in Juneau, had a bad feeling.

When Brock was using, he often ignored text messages or otherwise pushed family away. She saw him only a few times over the summer. The last was to meet his visiting girlfriend over Thai food.

She felt reassured. The girlfriend seemed like a stabilizing influence.

Maybe everything will be OK, she thought.

Then a few weeks later, on the night of Sept. 17, her mom showed up unexpectedly at her apartment door. Raegan couldn't figure out what she was doing there. She'd flown up from Seattle.

Haltingly, her mother explained why she was there: Brock had overdosed the day before at a house where he was staying with buddies.

His friends were on a hunting trip in Canada at the time. He was home alone. The mother of one of the roommates found his body.

[Brock](#) was not the first Eidsness brother lost to a heroin.

The oldest son, Brock and Raegan's stepbrother, [Eric Eidsness](#), died of an overdose in Wasilla in 2008.

"Like a pipeline draining resources"





Marc Lester / ADN

Lt. Kris Sell says drug paraphernalia can often be found in parks and public spaces in Juneau, such as around parking areas of Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge. Heroin transactions, which have a huge profit margins compared to cities in the Lower 48, occur in public places like retail parking lots, she said.

It wasn't until this year that Juneau police began tracking overdoses related to heroin.

The word just kept appearing in police reports, said Sell.

After years of going after the supply of heroin, police are starting to realize they can't fix Juneau's thirst for the drug with arrests alone.

Police know heroin comes in packed on people's bodies on airplanes and ferries or via the postal service mail or freight barges. Larger, professional drug-dealing syndicates from California and Arizona have become involved, using local addicts as low-level dealers.

Police say they are still trying to stop the supply of heroin from entering Juneau. But it isn't enough.

"You can't shut off an industry as profitable as that when there's still a huge amount of demand that's going on. We have to get at the demand. That means stopping people from starting to use and getting people who are treatment."

On orders from the chief, she's begun posting anonymous interviews with former and current addicts on the police Facebook page.

She wants to introduce people to addicts, in part to dispel myths but also to showcase the dark reality of addiction.

The hope is to stop people before they start using, Sell said. Some of the videos focus on the high cost of the drug and the things people will do to get it.

A conservative estimate is that Juneau has 200 active heroin addicts, she says.



Since the drug sells at an astronomical markup of street prices found, say, in Seattle, a single high can cost \$100.

If those addicts are getting high once a day, at a minimum, that adds up to \$20,000 sucked into criminal enterprise every day in Juneau, Sell says.

"It's just like a pipeline that's draining resources from the city."

"They just reminded me so much of my own sons"



Marc Lester / ADN

Michele Morgan became alarmed when kids she knew died this year of heroin overdoses. "They just reminded me so much of my own sons," she said. Morgan used money she had been saving for a vehicle to launch an awareness campaign.

Michele Morgan knew something was very wrong when the twenty-something players in Juneau's recreational softball league started dying of heroin overdoses.

"Last year was when the normal kids, the kids the police didn't know, started dying," she said.

One of them overdosed just hours after playing with Morgan in the championship "Rain Ball" league game. Then, six months later, another was gone. Then a third.

Morgan organizes the softball league and lives in a funky house in Douglas with lots of dogs and a few goats.

She hasn't lost any family members to heroin but is among the leaders of the nascent community movement to face heroin head-on anyway.

After one death last summer, she took money she'd been saving to buy a minivan and spent it on blunt bumper stickers.

"HEROIN WILL KILL YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS," they read.

She's since made others with more lighthearted sayings like, "Bacon is 100 percent healthier than heroin." She even handed out T-shirts at one overdose victim's memorial service, at the request of his parents.

An organization Morgan is involved with, [Stop Heroin Start Talking](#), drew more than 60 people to its first meeting last month. Hundreds have joined a Facebook group. They want to drop the stigma associated with heroin and get people talking openly about what it's doing to Juneau.

A group of activists including Morgan is working to get [legislation](#) passed that would make [Narcan](#), an anti-overdose medication, available at Alaska drug stores.

Putting Narcan in the hands of friends and parents could have saved some of the people who died, Morgan said.

Why is she doing all this? She's scared.

The softball players who overdosed were polite young men who had been to college, held jobs, played sports and came from loving families.

"They just reminded me so much of my own sons," she said.

What gets to her, she says, is this: Their addictions, like the kids, were homegrown.



A mother waiting for a call



Marc Lester / ADN

Shirlee Bulard, who now lives in Anchorage, said two of the three children she raised in Juneau now struggle with heroin addiction. She worries that she'll be the next parent to be notified of a heroin-related death. "I literally do not shut my phone off," she said.

Damming the flow of heroin into Juneau will involve the full involvement of the community, says Johnson, the police chief.

"We gotta do something about the demand. Waiting for people to die isn't an acceptable outcome."

It's starting to happen: There are discussions about treatment options, tougher penalties for dealers and supporting the limited options for recovery already available in town.

But if the crisis has reached a boil, there's wide agreement that it isn't over yet.

Ask parents like Shirlee Bulard, who is living in limbo in the land of heroin.

An Anchorage hairdresser and mother of three, she is part of a bleak kinship of parents whose adult children are addicts.

Her triplets -- two girls and a boy -- grew up mostly in Juneau. They were social, outgoing kids who played hockey, performed on the drill team and cultivated a large group of friends.

They too were members of the class of 2008.

She says one daughter has stayed away from drugs and is married with a steady state government job.

The other two have struggled since high school with deepening addictions.



Marc Lester / ADN

Used heroin paraphernalia is discarded at the side of Industrial Boulevard in Juneau on Tuesday, October 20, 2015.

After years of frustration, Bulard says she's desperate enough to talk publicly about her children's problems.

Her son has spent more time in jail than out, mostly for drug-related crimes. Right now, he's in a three-month long treatment program in Ketchikan.

She is hopeful that he's ready to get clean for good.

It is her other daughter that frightens her most.

On a recent visit to Juneau, Bulard barely recognized a gaunt figure walking down the street as her child.

Bulard says the daughter lost custody of her 4-year-old son to grandparents. It's unclear where she is living. Maybe she's couch-surfing.

This spring, she brought the daughter up to Anchorage in hopes of getting her into treatment.

When she seemed ready to get clean, Bulard says she was told there were wait lists for treatment beds.

Bulard ended up installing a video surveillance system in her living room after her daughter stole to buy drugs.

At one point she found the 25-year-old curled over a heating vent, shaking violently from withdrawals.

"I just put my body on top of hers," Bulard said.

She thought about going out on the streets herself to get her daughter a fix, just to keep her from getting sick.

The thought of it makes Bulard tremble with anger.

She says she has written to legislators of her family's plight.

She keeps reading the names of kids who grew up with her own in the obituary section of the newspaper.

At night, she keeps her phone turned on right beside the bed, in case the call comes telling her one of her children has overdosed on heroin.

Marc Lester contributed to this story.