

# Heroin, much discussed in state races, now on back burner in national politics

The only thing scarier than these photos is the U.S. heroin trend

TOP TRENDING

 **Paul Singer**, USA TODAY 6:50 a.m. EDT September 15, 2016

 [Two Iowa police officers killed in 'ambush' attacks](http://www.usatoday.com)  
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(Photo: John Minchillo, AP)

WASHINGTON — Across the nation, while public concern about heroin addiction is the highest it has been in years, the same can't be said about attention on the national political stage.

Searches about "heroin" peaked last week for the third time this year at the highest level in the past five years, according to data from Google Trends, with the exception of a spike in interest in February 2014 when actor Philip Seymour Hoffman died of a heroin overdose. Drug overdoses from heroin tripled between 2010 and 2014, and more people died from drug overdoses than car crashes in 2014, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6450a3.htm?s\\_cid=mm6450a3\\_w\)](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6450a3.htm?s_cid=mm6450a3_w).

The surge in opioid addiction and overdoses has been dominating several key Senate races, but on the presidential campaign trail and in Washington, the issue has been much less prominent. News coverage on the presidential race has tended to emphasize ethical charges against Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and focus less around their positions on various issues. Both the Republican and Democratic conventions included events intended to highlight the addiction problem, but Clinton has provided a much more detailed plan for addressing it.

Earlier this month, Clinton proposed a \$10 billion plan to fight addiction with increased resources for treatment and prevention, as well as increased training for people who prescribe pain medication and an increased focus on drug treatment in the criminal justice system. Trump has said little about the issue, other than that building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border will keep narcotics out of the U.S.

At the national campaign level, addiction is still "getting short shrift and the vast majority of the reason is still stigma," said Dr. R. Corey Waller, chair of the legislative advocacy committee of the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

Addiction is a disease just like diabetes, Waller said, and approximately the same number of Americans suffer from both. Yet there are 10 times as many board-certified diabetes specialists as there are addiction specialists, because addiction has not been addressed as a medical condition.



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[Heroin crisis: Stories from the front line](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/09/05/front-lines-heroin-crisis/89539786/)

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## Landmark bill, but no money

After Congress approved landmark legislation — but not funding — for expanded drug addiction treatment and prevention in July, attention has turned away from the issue. The bill approved spending \$181 million each year to fight the opioid epidemic, but that money still has to be provided by Congress, and it is not yet part of the budget.

"They just built a Ferrari that they put no gas in," Waller said.

President Obama met with congressional leaders Monday to discuss funding priorities for a spending bill that must pass by Sept. 30 to keep the government open. Both sides mentioned funding to fight the spread of the Zika virus as a top concern. Neither side mentioned opioids, though Obama has previously requested \$1.1 billion for grants to the states to fight the epidemic.



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[Obama meets with congressional leaders to hash out fall agenda](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/09/12/obama-meets-congressional-leaders-hash-out-fall-agenda/90268730/)

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Zika funding could be included in the stop-gap package, but opioid funding will likely have to wait until Congress gets around to passing a yearlong spending bill to fund the government through 2017. That may not happen until December or later.

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"It's looking like we are once again going to get a continuing resolution which doesn't give us any opportunity to put in new money," said Becky Vaughn, VP for addictions at the National Council for Behavioral Health.

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"This is not like Zika in that it has a potential to cause a problem." Waller said. "This is currently causing a problem... this year we are going to see more overdoses than last year because there is no pathway for the (treatment and prevention) workforce to be increased without funding."  
(<http://www.usatoday.com>)



A box of the opioid antidote Naloxone, also known as Narcan, sits on display during a family addiction support group on March 23, 2016 in Groton, Conn. (Photo: John Moore, Getty Images)

## Top issue in key races

By contrast, opioid abuse has been a huge topic in congressional races across the country, particularly in states hardest hit by the epidemic. While Congress was on its summer recess, Democratic candidates sent a stream of press releases accusing incumbent Republicans of shirking their responsibility to provide funding for addiction treatment.

- In Wisconsin, Republican Sen. Ron Johnson — whose re-election bid is considered a tossup by the non-partisan Rothenberg & Gonzales Political Report — [revealed](http://archive.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/with-death-of-nephew-opioid-epidemic-hits-home-with-ron-johnson-b99687184z1-372000331.html) that his nephew recently died of a heroin overdose. As chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, Johnson issued a report Sept. 1 detailing his work on the issue and highlighting his conclusion "that our borders remain insecure and that a key driver of that insecurity is America's insatiable demand for drugs." His opponent, former senator Russ Feingold, released a radio ad a few days later saying Johnson "has essentially done nothing" about the epidemic during his time in the Senate.
- In Ohio, Republican Sen. Rob Portman made his work on opioid addiction the feature of the [first television ads](#) (</story/news/politics/blogs/2016/05/31/portman-ad-blitz-focuses-his-work-combat-heroin-epidemic/85174616/>) in his re-election campaign. Portman was a lead sponsor of the opioid bill that Congress approved in July and is now pushing a second bill that would block synthetic opioids being sent through the U.S. mail. Former Ohio governor Ted Strickland, who is challenging Portman, says the senator has not done enough to secure funding for treatment and prevention.
- In New Hampshire, the Senate race pitting sitting GOP Sen. Kelly Ayotte against departing Gov. Maggie Hassan has been marked by charges and counter charges about who has done a better job of addressing the state's addiction crisis. Hassan has proposed a prescription tracking system that would prevent patients from "doctor shopping" to get more pain pills. Ayotte has said she has used her position in the Senate to secure funding for New Hampshire's addiction crisis.

The issue resonates in state races more than in the presidential campaigns because "our state representatives and local representatives are hearing it in much larger volume," said Jim Joyner, president of the Ohio Association of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Counselors. For local lawmakers, Joyner said, "their phones are ringing and they are hearing from the families and the parents" of people who are fighting addiction or dying of overdoses. It should be a national issue because "this is our number one public health issue," Joyner said, but both presidential candidates "are like schoolchildren doing

spitballs. They are not really talking about issues, they are doing personal attacks."

But some advocates note that during the presidential primaries, particularly in New Hampshire, many candidates appeared to really embrace the depth of concern about opioids. "The drug issue was the number one issue among voters and for the first time ever we saw candidates talking about the drug issue not as a policy issue . . . but as a personal issue that had affected their family," said Marcia Lee Taylor, president of the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids.

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The presidential candidates have now been distracted by other issues, Taylor said, but "I think the candidates would be well-served talking about this issue more."



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[Heroin 'apocalypse' shadows New Hampshire primary](#)

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/02/08/heroin-new-hampshire-primary/79720402/>



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