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## Heroin Scourge Overtakes a 'Quaint' Vermont Town

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE MARCH 5, 2014



Stephanie Predel is off heroin. But the Bennington, Vt., area, where she lives, is in the throes of an epidemic. Credit Cheryl Senter for The New York Times

BENNINGTON, Vt. — Stephanie Predel, a stick-thin 23-year-old freshly out of jail, said she was off heroin. But she knows precisely where she could get more drugs if she ever wanted them — at the support meetings for addicts.

“I can get most of my drugs right at the meeting,” she said. “Drug dealers go because they know they’re going to get business.” She added, “People are going into the bathroom to get high.”

Bennington, a pre-Revolutionary town of 17,000 people, presents another face of the heroin epidemic that has swept

through Vermont.

In January, Gov. Peter Shumlin devoted his entire State of the State address to what he said was a “full-blown heroin crisis” gripping the state. In an interview later, he said that the state’s localities had managed only a patchwork response. Citing Rutland’s antidrug crusade as a hopeful sign, he said that not all areas had felt the same urgency.



Alfred Hickey said he quit heroin. Credit Cheryl Senter for The New York Times

“Bennington is where Rutland was four years ago,” he said.

Known for its pottery and its classical music, Bennington exudes an early American gentility. A distinctive bell tower sits atop the Old First Congregational Church, where Robert Frost is buried. An obelisk commemorates victory over the British at the Battle of Bennington (1777).

But the 21st-century drug scourge is evident in the faces of some of the young people hanging out near the Stewart’s convenience store on Main Street.

“The quaint town of Bennington has had a rude awakening of drugs,” said Wayne Godfrey, a Vermont state trooper, as he

cruised the streets here one recent frigid morning. “Everyone is doing it,” he said of heroin. “It’s in the high school. The kids are doing it right in school. You find Baggies in the hallway.”

Two sting operations, one of them believed to be the biggest drug sweep in Vermont history, took place here last year. But Officer James A. Gulley Jr. of the Bennington Police Department said that arrests had not stanching the drug flow. “You send one person to jail,” he said, “and everyone else says, ‘I’m going in and taking over that market.’ ”

People in Bennington trying to wean themselves from opioids have access to substitutes like buprenorphine and to counseling, but the nearest methadone clinic is an hour away.

That is a hardship for Lloyd Wright, who is 42 but looks much older and lives in a motel room on the outskirts of town with his two dogs and two cats. He said he stopped using heroin recently but his craving persists. He has been so desperate, he said, that he had a dentist pull out his top teeth on one side, hoping he could get a batch of painkillers. “I had a few bad teeth, but I had

all of them pulled because I figured I'd get more pills," he said, opening his mouth wide to reveal his toothless gums. He got the pills, but went through them in one day.

Alfred Hickey, 42, said he quit heroin cold turkey recently after being on a waiting list for a treatment program and not getting in. "I use mind over matter," he said. "If I don't mind, it doesn't matter."

Dr. Trey Dobson, chief medical officer at Southwestern Vermont Medical Center, said that since Governor Shumlin's speech, a coalition of health care providers and others had begun discussing what services, including methadone and Suboxone, would best meet Bennington's needs. Methadone requires tighter protocols and a more elaborate medical infrastructure than other maintenance drugs.

And such clinics are not always welcome. "A lot of people are afraid that if you build it, they will come, and they don't want a bunch of addicts hanging around," said Paul Doucette, Bennington's police chief. "I hate to say it, but guess what? We already have them."

Vermont ranks high on Gallup's "well-being" index, but several recovering addicts here say they do not feel a part of that Vermont. They do not ski, or have jobs, or have much to look forward to.

Hailey Clark, 20, is just out of jail, where she was forced to quit her heroin habit. With a felony conviction for selling and possession, she cannot find work. She has no home and is staying with a friend. Just above one of her puffy white boots is a thick piece of GPS hardware, which monitors her every move. She aches for her young son, who is in her mother's custody, but knows she is in no position to care for him. "I'm not ready yet to get him back," she said, wiping a tear with the cuff of her sweater. "I don't have anything for him, and I don't want to rip him out of my mom's house and bring him to nothing."

Adding to their hopelessness is the seemingly endless New England winter.

"There's nothing to do here," said Ms. Predel, whose addiction also cost her custody of her three children and who is now staying with her mother in Bennington County in a former hunting cabin. "Come wintertime, everyone is inside using."

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