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# With Opioid Crisis, US Stands Apart From the World

By **Crime and Justice News** | December 29, 2017

Opioid overdoses prompted a second straight decline in life expectancy in the United States last year. Yet life expectancy in other developed countries is going up because people elsewhere are not dying from opioids at the rates they are in the U.S., which has 4 percent of the world's population but about 27 percent of the world's drug-overdose deaths. What explains the discrepancy? [The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/28/opioid-abuse-in-america-is-so-bad-its-lowering-our-life-expectancy-why-hasnt-the-epidemic-hit-other-countries/?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories_no-name%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.2b4549ebff7f) blames ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/28/opioid-abuse-in-america-is-so-bad-its-lowering-our-life-expectancy-why-hasnt-the-epidemic-hit-other-countries/?hpid=hp\\_hp-more-top-stories\\_no-name%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.2b4549ebff7f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/28/opioid-abuse-in-america-is-so-bad-its-lowering-our-life-expectancy-why-hasnt-the-epidemic-hit-other-countries/?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories_no-name%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.2b4549ebff7f)) the U.S. medical system. Americans are prescribed opioids far more often than their counterparts in other countries. In the U.S., 50,000 opioid doses are taken daily per every million residents. That is nearly 40 percent higher than the rate in Germany and Canada, and double the rate in Austria and Denmark. It is four times higher than in Britain, and six times higher than in France and Portugal.

This is in large part a result of our health insurance structure. Unlike countries that provide universal health care funded by state taxes, the United States has a mostly privatized system of care. And experts say insurers here are much more likely to pay for a pill than physical therapy or repeat treatments. As a result, Americans are being prescribed opioids. Often they were given several more pills than they could be expected to use—to avoid repeat visits. “Other countries deal with pain in much healthier ways,” said Judith Feinberg, a professor at the West Virginia University School of Medicine.

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