

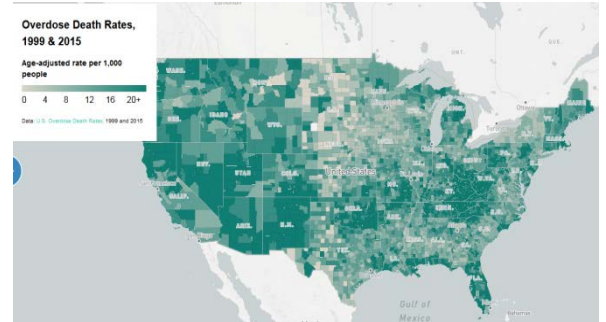
Lesson Plan: The Opioid Epidemic in America

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Featured resources

KQED's The Lowdown: [Mapping America's Opioid Crisis](#)

NPR: [Teaching the Opioid Crisis](#) (8:28, audio)



Opening quick write prompt:

What is an “epidemic?” What is an example of an epidemic that you have heard about or studied? What is often done to stop epidemics? If you’re not sure, what are 2-3 questions you have about how epidemics happen and what can be done to stop them?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will analyze the factors that led to the opioid epidemic, the effects of the crisis on communities and what is being done to curb opioid addiction.
- Students will evaluate and reflect on the current crisis and proposed solutions.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What are factors that led to the opioid epidemic? What are the effects of the epidemic on people and communities? What are government and healthcare workers doing to respond?

Opioid use has been declared a national health emergency as overdose deaths from abusing opioids such as oxycodone, morphine and heroin, have skyrocketed in recent years. This class of drugs was once used only to treat severe pain related to cancer. But in the 1990s, doctors began prescribing opioids for less serious conditions, leading to widespread use and eventual addiction in some patients. The epidemic affects more than those addicted: families and communities have been devastated by opioid use. While the current crisis affects both urban and rural areas, white Americans comprise the largest group of opioid addicts. This has led some to draw stark contrasts between the focus on rehabilitation characterizing this epidemic and the harsh calls for mandatory jail time that came out of the 1980s crack epidemic, which primarily affected urban communities of color. This lesson explores the causes and consequences of the current opioid epidemic, including a chance to view the epidemic through the eyes of fellow teens.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the reading, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
chronic (adj.)	Continuing for a long time or most of the time <i>Some people get addicted to opioids after a doctor prescribes them as a treatment for chronic pain.</i>
disproportionate (adj.)	Too large or too small in relation to something <i>A disproportionate of opioid addicts are white men, which many say has affected the government's emphasis on rehabilitation rather than criminalization in addressing the crisis.</i>
epidemic (n.)	Something very harmful that spreads quickly <i>Opioid abuse is referred to as an epidemic because it has affected so many people. It is now the leading cause of death of Americans under 50.</i>
receptor (n.)	A cell in the body that senses a change and causes a reaction <i>Opioids affect specific brain receptors that cause users to feel intense sensations of pleasure.</i>
rehabilitation (n.)	The process of helping a person to become drug or alcohol free <i>Many healthcare workers think of drug use and addiction as a disease that requires rehabilitation, rather than a crime that requires strict punishment.</i>

Investigate

- **Discuss** the quick-write prompt and define epidemic (see definition above). Ask students if they have heard of the opioid epidemic. Call on a few students to share what they know.
 - Be sure students know the term *opioid* most often refers to prescription pain medicine like morphine and oxycodone as well as illegal drugs such as heroin and fentanyl. Legal or illegal, all of these substances are highly addictive.
- **Explain:** The crisis with opioid use and abuse is called an epidemic because it is harmful and has spread throughout the country. Display the interactive map on [The Lowdown post](#), which shows the difference between opioid-related deaths in 1999 and in 2015. Explain or ask students to explain what the data on the map show. (Deaths from opioid abuse have increased dramatically in almost every part of the country in the last 16 years.)

- **Ask:** Given what we see on the map, how do you think we got to the point where opioid abuse is an epidemic? What do you think had to happen in such a short time? Call on students to share their ideas or what they know about the origins of the epidemic.
- **Read:** Individually or in small groups, students read [The Lowdown article](#) about the current state of the opioid epidemic. As they read, they should make notes about how the epidemic started and the effects that it has had on communities.
- **Check for understanding after reading:** Ask students again how we got to the level of the epidemic we see clearly on the map. This time, students should answer using information from [The Lowdown post](#). Be sure students understand the role of legal prescriptions in the crisis as well as illegal drug use, especially the change in the 1980s and 1990s to prescribe opioids for non-cancer pain.
- **Ask:** What or who do you think is to blame for the opioid epidemic? The doctors? The drug companies? The addicts themselves? Ask students to explain their answer using evidence. Then ask, do you think the solutions to the epidemic will be effective? Why or why not?
- **Explain:** In addition to solutions like drug rehab programs and limiting opioid prescriptions, some communities have come up with creative solutions. In one high school in southern Ohio, there's a class specifically for students who are dealing with family members addicted to opioids. Tell students they'll be listening how the epidemic has affected two teenagers.
- As a class or individually, students listen to the NPR story [Teaching the Opioid Crisis](#). As students listen, they should make note of the ways the opioid epidemic has affected the lives of the people interviewed. (Note: [The transcript](#) of the NPR story is available for students to follow along as they listen, which is helpful for English language learners and struggling readers.)
- **Check for understanding after listening:** What are some ways the opioid epidemic has affected the lives of Macy and Lexi? Why do you think Lexi's mom was proud of her essay, even though it criticized the mom's addiction? What did you learn about the opioid epidemic from listening to Macy and Lexi's stories that you didn't learn from the article?
- **Transition to the Make and Share:** Tell students they will have a chance to share their thoughts on this issue in the comments section of The Lowdown. The first time they comment, students must sign in to [Disqus](#), a free discussion app embedded in The Lowdown.
 - To sign in to [Disqus](#), click the "Comments" button at the bottom of the post.
 - Click the blue "Get Started" button in the gray "Welcome to Disqus" box.
 - Students will need to enter a username. We recommend first name, last initial.
 - After signing in for the first time, students must verify their email address before commenting. A verification email will appear in their inbox once they sign in to Disqus.

- Students write a response to the question: **What do you think should be done to end the opioid epidemic in your community or in communities that have been affected?**
 - Responses should be supported by evidence from [The Lowdown](#) and [NPR story](#).
 - Encourage students to reply to other comments after posting their response. Remind them to use evidence to support their claims and respectful language when responding.

Assessment/reflection

- Students reflect on what they have learned either through a class discussion or in writing:
 - What have you learned about the opioid epidemic? Did your thinking change or stay the same as you learned more about the issue?
 - What was it like to post your responses publically and reply to other posts? What did you learn from other students? What do you hope they learned from you?

[Circle chats](#), small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension/homework

Track the opioid crisis in your county: Research public health data and create a map, chart or infographic to show the effects of the opioid epidemic in your community. Public health information is available online by county. Students should search ‘county name + public health data’. Free online tools for creating a map or infographic include: [Piktochart](#), [Canva](#), [Adobe Spark](#) and [Google My Maps](#).

Write/speak locally: Students turn their opinions about this issue into a letter, short speech or presentation, then research ways to make their voice heard in their community. (Example: Speaking during the public comment section of a city council meeting, etc.) For a list of how to contact local officials, check out [KQED Learning’s Local Election Toolkit](#).

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
D2.Civ.13.6-8	Analyze the purposes, implementation and consequence of public policies in multiple settings.