

How Heroin Is Invading America's Schools

Once a junkie's drug, heroin has taken hold in suburbs across the country, offering teens a hard-core high for the cost of \$10—and sometimes their lives.

What have I become?" 23-year-old Andrew Jones asked his mom shortly before he died. "What's happened to me?" A star high school athlete who went on to play Division I football for Missouri State University, Andrew was an honors student whom friends described as outgoing, charismatic, and loyal. He was also a heroin addict.

Never even a recreational drug user, Andrew had been the first to discourage friends at his Catholic high school from smoking pot. But his story is frighteningly typical of the current heroin epidemic among suburban American youth. It's an issue made all the more timely by the recent heroin-related death of *Glee* star [Cory Monteith](#), best known and beloved for playing squeaky-clean high school football star Finn Hudson.

What Cory and Andrew expose is that heroin isn't at all what it used to be. Not only is the drug much more powerful than before (purity can be as high as 90 percent) but it's also no longer limited to the dirty-needle, back-alley experience so many of us picture. Now it's as easy as purchasing a pill, because that's what heroin has become: a powder-filled capsule known as a button, designed to be broken open and snorted, that can be purchased for just \$10. And it regularly is—on varsity sports teams, on Ivy League campuses, and in safe suburban neighborhoods.

During his sophomore year of college, Andrew fell ill from a virus that left him with pancreas damage. Soon after that, he broke his hand. Add in routine wisdom teeth surgery, and Andrew was swimming in prescription painkillers. He became addicted. "He would steal them, he would

buy them, he would find them wherever he could," remembers his friend, 26-year-old Missouri native Katie Gerstenkorn. "He stole painkillers from me, actually."

When Andrew was given a capsule of heroin at a party, he was instantly hooked. According to Dan Duncan, associate executive director at St. Louis's National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (NCADA), most heroin users start with pain pills as Andrew did. It's no wonder: In an interview with *60 Minutes* last year, National Institute on Drug Abuse director Dr. Nora Volkow dropped the eye-opening statistic that in a country of 312 million people, 210 million prescriptions for opiate medications were written in 2011 alone. But pain pills are expensive—legally and on the black market—pushing those dependent on them to seek out a cheaper, more easily accessible alternative with a similar kind of high: heroin.

Andrew went to his parents for help. "He couldn't get away from the drug," says his mom, Pam. "It's a hunger, it's a thirst. You throw all your morals out the window." Before long, he was caught stealing money from his roommates so he could buy more. After a stint in rehab, an overdose, and another stint in rehab, it looked like he was finally starting to get a handle on his addiction. Like Cory Monteith, Andrew was doing his best to clean up—and everyone in his life believed he could do it. Until the overdose that killed him.

In 2008 Duncan and his NCADA staff started getting an influx of calls about heroin to their help line. "It wasn't just that we were getting calls about heroin—we were getting calls about heroin and teens specifically," he says. "It became clear that this was a problem in some of the best high schools in the area. Public, private, most of them." By 2010, the year Andrew died, the number of calls about heroin had exploded. "The thing that was most startling was the average age of the deaths from heroin overdoses," says St. Louis County police chief Tim Fitch. "Historically the age for most heroin deaths has been in the 40-to-45 range. But now the average age is between eighteen and 25."

For some, heroin abuse starts even earlier. At fourteen, Emily* was a high school freshman who had just made the varsity cheerleading squad. By fifteen, she was a regular heroin user. Despite her habit, Emily was able to maintain a facade at school, getting good grades and staying out of trouble. "It was like I was leading a double life," she says. "I thought, Maybe this is my little secret, and it's not as bad as everyone says it is."

At first, she did it only on weekends with a friend of a friend's older brother. He would provide the drug for free but quickly began pressuring her to have sex with him. Eventually she caved. "I slept with him because I felt like he was giving something to me, so I had to give something to him," she admits. "Looking back on it, my self-esteem was so low, and that's why I was doing all these things." Her supplier was 30 years old.

Emily started skipping school, and then didn't try out for cheerleading the next year. Doing heroin became part of her daily routine. When a friend wanted to try it for her sixteenth birthday, Emily realized heroin wasn't her little secret anymore—it was something other kids at her school were doing too.

Over the course of two years, she entered treatment six times, overdosed on heroin twice, and ran away from home. Emily was thrown out of a hotel and a homeless shelter after that. She returned home and attended twelve-step meetings, but continued to use. Finally a switch flipped. "I was willing to go to any length to get high, and then it became clear that I needed to go to any length to get sober. I had to change every single thing in my life, which was terrifying," Emily says. "But when

the pain of staying the same was greater than the pain of change, that's when I knew I really had to do something."

In 2012 and 2013, local news reports in Denver, Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle, Orange County, Syracuse, and a growing number of other areas told the tales of teens dying from heroin. Cases like Andrew's are becoming more of the norm, while those of recovering addicts like Emily seem to be more of the exception. And with a year and a half of sobriety under her belt, Emily wants to expose teens to the scary prevalence of the drug that nearly killed her. She speaks at schools and treatment centers and is studying to become a nurse. "Today I can be a part of things instead of apart from them. It's so hard to describe the pain and the misery I felt, the downward spiral," Emily says. "My worst day in sobriety is so much better than even my best day getting high."

Name has been changed