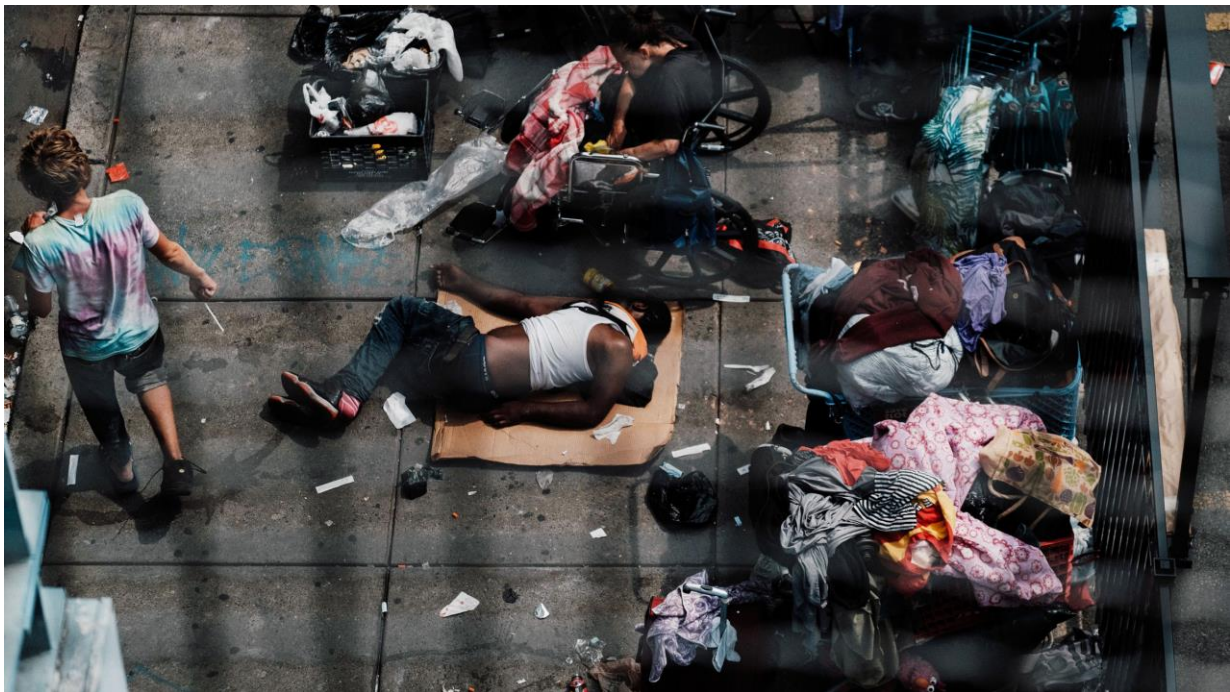


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Opioids. In Kensington, doom awaits. Reportage from America's largest open-air drug market.

The third wave



Addicts on Kensington Avenue in Philadelphia. Fentanyl is mixed with chemicals from China and smuggled across the border from Mexico. It has cost tens of thousands of human lives. Photo: Spencer Platt, Getty Images

[MARKUS BERNSEN](#)

PHILADELPHIA – Sooner or later, most drug addicts in Kensington have to make a choice. A final decision where they either step back from the edge or step over it.

They come here from all over the East Coast, some even further afield. They may have started popping pills in New Jersey or shot heroin in the arm in West Virginia,

but at some point most get behind the wheel and drive to America's largest open-air drug market, where the drugs are stronger and cheaper and where the police leave one alone.

Once they've tried getting high in Kensington, it's so tempting to stay a little longer. After a few short visits, they spend the night in their car in a side street off Kensington Avenue. After a week, the money has run out, and all the petrol has been used to keep the car's air conditioning running. After a month, the air has seeped out of the tires, the windows have been knocked out and replaced with blankets and plastic bags.

"Then they have the choice," says Bill McKinney, holding up an index finger to illustrate the importance of that moment. He's lived here for 20 years, in a light brown townhouse just off McPherson Square Park, which has become a center for the latest, horrific phase of the opioid epidemic.

"Their car can't drive, so they're stranded in Kensington," he continues. "It's not a good situation. But they have one last chance: They can sell the car as scrap and get \$300 (around DKK 2,000, *ed.*) in hand. It is enough for a bus ticket home, regardless of where in the country they come from. But it's also enough to buy a lot of drugs.'

McKinney points to the street in front of his house. You get the feeling that it could have been a nice place if it weren't for the rival street gangs and the approximately 1,000 drug addicts who live here year-round, as well as the many, many others who come during the warm months.

"I can't count how many times I've seen the scrap dealer pick up cars up there. And I always say to the people who sell the car: 'That's it. You know that, right? This is your last chance.' They always answer 'yes, yes, now I'm going home, it's clear'. And then a few days later I see them lying completely drugged down in the park.'

McKinney is the leader of a local organization that is trying to rally other organizations to save the district. It is not easy. Kensington is an old working-class neighborhood ten minutes north of downtown Philadelphia, known from the Rocky movie and sandwiched between freeways and railroads. It has always had its problems with gangs and drugs, but in the past five years the bottom has gone out of place. It's surprisingly awful. If one's experience with drug addiction is limited to the rowdy crowds that usually hang out behind European railway stations with their dogs, one is not at all prepared for the sight that meets one here.

Where to start? On Kensington Avenue, people with open wounds lie in piles of rubbish. It is snowing and they are everywhere. Some are crouched in the fetal position against the house walls, others sit on the pavement with open mouths and closed eyes swaying in the wind. Every 50 meters there is a new pile of human misfortune, which had a great brutal sweep sweeping the men and women of the street together with the street garbage, the cardboard boxes and the empty bottles.

"There's nowhere like this in the entire United States," says Bill McKinney as we cross Main Street and the train rumbles past on the elevated track above us. "Other cities have bits and pieces of the same problem, but here in Kensington we have the complete, complete dissolution."

Death on the spot

Exactly what the cause of the problem is, Americans have yet to agree on. The first opioid wave began with the pharmaceutical companies, who persuaded doctors and hospitals across the country to pour drugs like OxyContin on patients with severe pain. They were *hooked*, and when the health authorities finally put a cork in the bottle, several states had abstinence. The second wave was set in motion when the Mexican cartels came to the rescue with heroin.

Fentanyl is the third wave that is sweeping over Philadelphia and many other American cities at the moment. Fentanyl is a synthetic drug that the drug cartels brew from chemicals from China and then smuggle across the border from Mexico into the United States.

They have also started putting it in all sorts of other substances. Cocaine and ecstasy are mixed with fentanyl, and the cartels have also started a large-scale production of pirated pills, which are confusingly similar to the genuine prescription product, but are often mixed with the deadly substance.

If you are not used to opioids, you risk dying from just a pinch of fentanyl. The most gruesome deaths in American media right now are the many teenagers, college students and family men who take a hit of cocaine or swallow a sleeping pill and go into cardiac arrest on the spot. Entire parties have been found dead around a table as if frozen in time.

In the past three years, at least 70,000 Americans have died from a fentanyl overdose, and politicians have blamed one thing and then another for the epidemic. In Washington, it has also become a sensitive foreign policy issue, affecting the American pain points Mexico and China. So far, neither has received much help from either country. On Wednesday of this week, Mexico's president did indeed promise to ban fentanyl for medical use, but at the same time he denied that the drug is produced illegally in the country. It comes shortly after US authorities confiscated large batches of pills from smugglers at the border. There was enough fentanyl, as the US Drug Enforcement Administration put it, to kill every single US citizen.

China is not a one-size-fits-all solution either. Currently, there is virtually no cooperation between US and Chinese authorities, so banning the export of the chemical components for the substance may have long prospects.

"It's always easiest to point to one thing as the cause of a problem," says Bill McKinney. 'It's China!' 'It's the problems at the border!' In that way, it also does not point back to ourselves, to our collective responsibility to find a solution. Then it's only them who do something wrong.'

In Philadelphia, the truth is that many at City Hall are relieved that the problem has been isolated in Kensington, he says. By gathering them there and letting drug dealers and addicts know that the police should probably leave them alone as long as they stay out there - that way you have been able to spare the rest of the city.

"Isolation is the only measure that everyone can agree on," says McKinney. "It has been imagined that if you just get everything together in one place, you will also be able to solve the problem. But if you've never had a solution, it doesn't help much. Right now, everyone can only agree that they don't want the problems where they themselves live.'

Taste tests of substances

The third wave is different, says Bill McKinney. In recent years, several states have increased the penalties for selling fentanyl. And it could look like a sign that Americans have gradually grown tired of hearing about the epidemic everywhere, he believes:

"A year ago, there was still great sympathy for the victims of the opioid epidemic. Back then, the story was also that it was the whites who had worked hard and who had become addicted to OxyContin after going to the doctor. But I am old enough to remember the crack epidemic of the 1990s, when there was not the slightest pity for the victims. And I think we're starting to see the same thing happen now. Around the country, people have begun to demand that someone be thrown in jail, and this is happening at the same time that most addicts on the street are no longer white, but black.'

But there is also something about the new wave that does not follow the normal patterns, McKinney believes.

You don't ask your drug dealer what he puts in the drugs. Many of those you can see here on the street have no idea what they are wearing either.

MELANIE, EMPLOYEE OF THE AID ORGANIZATION SAVAGE SISTERS

"My experience tells me that there is a wave in the drug market every six or seven years," he says. "After the wave has broken and the violence has peaked, everything calms down again. And then a new cycle of six to seven years begins. But this is the first time that the wave doesn't break, but just keeps growing. The opioid epidemic has been going on for a long time now, and it has only grown and gotten worse."

We pass a corner behind McKinney's office where drugs are sold. There have also been quite a few shootings and murders near the corner, so McKinney keeps a low profile and walks ahead of me down the sidewalk. Suddenly there is a throng of people around two black guys in jogging suits. People are running towards them from all directions.

"They're handing out taste samples," McKinney explains when we've gotten a little further away. "To spread the word that a new substance has arrived. It's good advertising. Sometimes there are 100 people running down the street at the same time to get their hands on a bag."

Few people realize how much money there is in a place like Kensington, says McKinney. Not despite all the misery, but *because of* it. On the one hand, there is the drug trade, which is believed to be worth more than a billion dollars a year. But there are also the many organizations that make a living from the fact that Kensington is the toughest neighborhood in America. He has pointed them out during the walk through the neighborhood: the Christian missionaries who stand and preach above

the line for a soup kitchen. The many vans and mobile laboratories from the city's universities. The charity which is handing out new needles and has hired security guards in front of its headquarters.

"The other day a group of people went around knocking on doors because they wanted to 'play with our children' as they said. They had paid a church four hours away to take them on a mission trip out here. You have to understand that a lot of people's jobs depend on this never ending. But if you're an organization that makes \$25,000 a week doing mission trips to Kensington, do you really want the problems to go away?"

An experiment

You could ask them yourself. In the evening, I am accompanied by volunteers from the organization Savage Sisters, who will provide wound care and distribute food in McPherson Square Park. I visited their hot room on Kensington Avenue earlier in the day, where there was a long line for the shower in the back room. Some of the users sat and slept in chairs against the wall, others tried to sneak out to the toilet to fix. A man in a hoodie appeared to be hallucinating and kept talking about worms that lived under the skin.

Here I also got a warning from the head of the house, Sarah Laurel, who was dressed in black from head to toe and seemed very keen to appear as tough as nails:

"If you use the word 'zombie' about these people or call Kensington 'zombieland' or some crap like that, I will hunt you for the rest of my life!"

You now understand the comparison well. Fentanyl addicts tend to lean back and stretch their arms out for balance as they stagger off in slow motion. Currently, the drugs are also mixed with painkillers for animals, so-called 'tranq', which prolongs the intoxication, but also causes wounds from the needle to become infected and refuse to heal. There have been quite a few amputations of arms and legs lately.

I am accompanied by Melanie, one of Savage Sisters' other employees. She went to rehab 17 times before she finally became drug-free while in prison. She took fentanyl for a long time without realizing it.

"You don't ask your drug dealer what he puts in the drugs," she explains. "Many of the people you see here on the street have no idea what they're wearing either."

There is not much else left of Kensington Avenue. Virtually all shops are closed, and on the facades hang posters with missing persons who were last seen in the neighborhood. In the side streets, several cars with flat tires are waiting for the owners to make their choice.

Others seem to have only just arrived. There are chubby teenagers with blank eyes on the street. Some walk around with rolling suitcases and small bags as if they were just on a weekend holiday in hell.

In the park, a queue quickly forms for the tables with chocolate milk and cheeseburgers from McDonald's. On a staircase, two men are lighting a sad fire from a few planks. All around the sidewalks and lawns are the sweaty remains of previous bonfires, and for some reason it's particularly depressing that no one has thought of making a proper fireplace, but that everyone just starts over every night.

I'm talking to Chris, who is 32 and has been living on the streets for five years. He points to a bare pavement on the other side of the street, in front of what used to be an Arab restaurant: He sleeps there if he can otherwise get an eye shut. People steal from each other at night, he says.

His partner is Popeye, a 61-year-old military veteran who is in a wheelchair after losing one leg. Popeye has also lost the outermost of two fingertips after an infection from fentanyl mixed with animal medicine.

"Look, it's tranq too," he says, pointing to a man on the stairs behind us who is being looked after by two Savage Sisters. The man has rolled up his trouser leg and exposed a deep red foot and a shin that is completely tense with infection. In the middle of his foot, he has a oozing wound the size of a golf ball that looks like a well down into the flesh.

Others begin to compare their wounds. Most people have them. A New Jersey man would give anything to get back the pain pills that helped his back so much. "I'm only here because I want the pain to go away," he says. The only good thing about Kensington is that the police leave them alone. He tells of a policeman back home in Camden who was known to "break people's arms like they were chicken wings". He makes a quick movement with one arm. "Crack, crack."

"Hey!" Melanie exclaims as a man in a hoodie slowly walks up to her. "I thought you had been artificially kept alive at the hospital?" The man leans back, arms outstretched, and it takes a while before he answers, in a thin voice: "I wish I was."

After half an hour there is no more food and people start trickling back towards Kensington Avenue or up into the park. Chris stands back on the stairs as a train rumbles past above him.

"There is no place like this anywhere else on Earth," he says when the train has passed. "It's as if someone has put a glass dome down over the whole neighborhood to see how we want to behave."

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