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SUBURBIA'S DEADLY SECRET: PART 2

# The grim life of suburban addicts

## Pills open door to heroin, arrests, overdoses

By **REBECCA D. O'BRIEN**

STAFF WRITER

At 21 years old, Graham Dooner has the same wit and easy charisma that kept him on the edge of trouble as a student at Ridgewood High School. He cracks jokes, he drops lines like “ipso facto” into conversation, he could talk for hours about the history of the labor movement in Paterson.

But nearly two years of intravenous heroin use have consumed the body of this 6-foot, 4-inch former varsity athlete. His pale arms are lined with track marks, slender yellow bruises from daily injections. Beneath his Knicks cap and a mop of reddish hair, Dooner’s handsome face is gaunt and clammy, haunted by a bluish pallor and spotted with sores. His yellowed teeth are worn along the edges.

“With shooting heroin, people say it is something they would never, never, ever do,” Dooner said. “But, I mean, things change in a flash, especially when you are addicted to opiates. Your levels – your ‘I won’t go past that line’ – they quickly diminish.

“It’s sad. It really is,” Dooner said. “Eventually, it becomes you need it just to be yourself, you know what I mean?”

Like many addicts in and around North Jersey, Dooner has experienced a near-fatal overdose,



**“You wake up and it’s just this urge, this voice in your head, telling you, you need this to be normal. Once you get to that level, you are a master at deception, a master at manipulation.”**

— GRAHAM DOONER  
SPEAKING ABOUT  
HEROIN ADDICTION

fights with drug dealers and police, and multiple arrests.

Dooner’s latest arrest was in March. Between mid-January and mid-April, he and 89 others were arrested in Bergen and Passaic counties and charged with heroin possession, as part of a large task force operation led by the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office. That figure, roughly one arrest per day, does not include repeat offenders – Dooner was arrested twice in the same week. The

addicts flocked to Paterson from towns across Bergen and Passaic counties, from as far south as Princeton and as far north as Rockland County, N.Y. More than two-thirds of those arrested over the past four months were under age 30, with high school degrees and middle-class families.

Most told the same story: A casual relationship with pills, particularly painkillers, in their late teenage years led to a full-blown heroin addiction, a need that tugged on their every cell, demanding every waking moment.

They include a 25-year-old from Tenafly who has shoplifted and sold off her belongings to support her addiction; a 20-year-old from Franklin Lakes, who hid his painkiller and heroin habit from his fiancée for years; a 21-year-old woman from Rockland County whose addiction was so powerful she found her way to Paterson on Christmas Day, looking for a high.

Most, including Dooner, now face third-degree possession charges, which can later be expunged. They are unlikely to see jail time.

Dooner and his friends experimented with drugs in high school, mostly marijuana and the occasional pill. But his troubles really started, Dooner said, with a lacrosse injury his senior year. He was prescribed Percocet, then stronger painkillers. Once those stopped, he stole the drugs prescribed to his mother after she had back surgery.

“At that point, I was playing sports again, and I was taking opiates just to get through ballgames,” Dooner said. “None of my friends knew. It was a coping thing, a maintenance thing. It was almost mental – I thought I had to do this, to play in my games or to perform.”

For several years, the widespread abuse of prescription painkillers has alarmed public health experts and law enforcement officials. Prescriptions for Oxycontin, Percocet and other popular brand-name drugs based on the painkiller oxycodone have soared in recent years: In 2009, 257 million prescriptions for opioid painkillers – derived, like heroin, from the opium poppy – were dispensed nationwide, almost one per person,

according to a 2011 White House report.

In New Jersey in 2010, enough prescription painkillers were dispensed to medicate every state resident – there are nearly 9 million – at standard dosage rates for a month, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**“If Paterson was flooded, they’d swim. The geography is not good. It’s like a gambler living in Atlantic City.”**

LT. TOM DOMBROSKI,  
BERGEN COUNTY  
PROSECUTOR’S OFFICE,  
SPEAKING OF AN ADDICT’S

“It’s easy to get your hands on some sort of opioid,” said Ellen Elias, director of the Center for Alcohol and Drug Resources in Hackensack. “I think that many parents may be unaware of what the risks are in terms of how kids are accessing these pills. I believe prescriptions are written too frequently.”

These painkillers are, for many, a gateway to heroin, their chemical cousin. Heroin addicts in North Jersey tend to start their addiction stories with variations on the same line: “In my town, pills are everywhere.” They describe a suburban teenage culture that treats pill-popping the way many in their parents’ generation treated marijuana – casual, commonplace, a rite of passage.

Ramsey has seen several fatal heroin overdoses in recent years, Detective Brian Huth said. Like many, he placed some of the blame on pills.

He recalled picking up a 21-year-old Allendale woman – a heroin addict, he said, whom River Edge cops had caught several times hawking stolen goods at the local pawnshop. “She told me, ‘My generation sees pills differently than you do,’” Huth said. “That stuck with me. She’s absolutely right. They all started seeing the pills as OK.”

Dooner graduated from high school in the spring of 2010 with an addiction to painkillers and admission letters to several colleges. He chose the drugs.

### **Abuse-proof pill**

Oxycontin has for years been the nation’s most popular oxycodone-based painkiller, bringing in at least \$3 billion in annual sales. In 2010, responding in part to costly legal cases and public pressure, Purdue Pharma introduced a new version of Oxycontin that was more difficult to abuse: The new Oxies could no longer be crushed or dissolved

and were slower to take effect.

The change appeared to stem abuse of that drug, but it also had unforeseen consequences – it soon became clear that addicts were simply substituting other opioid painkillers, particularly heroin, which was cheaper and widely available. A study published in 2012 by the New England Journal of Medicine showed that heroin use among surveyed Oxycontin addicts nearly doubled after the 2010 reformulation.

“When they changed the formula to something that was abuse-proof, the pills started disappearing from the streets,” said Eric Richter, 20, whose heroin addiction began last winter after years of prescription drug abuse. Richter, who is from Franklin Lakes but now lives in Kinnelon, said he used to buy pills from a dealer on Route 46. “They were weaker, you couldn’t crush them.”

It was easier to find “blues,” 30mg Roxicodone (known as “roxies”), Richter said – but they cost up to \$30 a pill, and he needed more of them to “feel something.” Every day, Richter hid his daily dose of five or six pills in strategic places around the Franklin Lakes home he was then sharing with his fiancée, Jessica.

Richter held down a job at the family business, but was often late. “I wouldn’t be able to wake up in the morning,” he said.

“When you first start doing something, you think you’re just having fun,” Richter said. “Then you’re like – I need this. That’s basically how it starts.”

Richter said in April that he had never injected heroin and was now clean, taking college courses online. But the addiction cost him dearly: Between the pills and the heroin, Richter estimates he had spent more than \$45,000 on drugs over the past year and a half. He and his fiancée, who said she only found out about his addiction after his February arrest, have moved back in with his mother.

### **Closer to the source**

Changes in pharmacology weren’t the only thing that accelerated Graham Dooner’s addiction. In 2011, Dooner and his mother and brother left Ridgewood for Fair Lawn. He was now within just

a few miles of abundant, cheap heroin.

“What really helped the progression to street drugs, to heroin, was moving to Fair Lawn,” Dooner said.

Route 4 cuts through southern Fair Lawn, turning into Broadway before it goes over the Passaic River into neighboring Paterson, one of many access points along a porous border.

Not that anything could stop an addict. “If Paterson was flooded, they’d swim,” said Lt. Tom Dombroski of the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office. “The geography is not good. It’s like a gambler living in Atlantic City.”

Shortly after moving to Fair Lawn, Dooner said, he snorted heroin for the first time with a friend of his older brother. A few months later,

Dooner’s girlfriend, who was an intravenous user, shot him up. It felt like a “warm blanket,” Dooner said, an embrace of contentment.

“The first time I shot up, it’s kind of like the first time you ever did the drug, which is really what everybody is after – they’re after that first time,” Dooner said.

But the first high was followed by a first arrest, in October 2011. “Once that happens, you know, I start getting down on myself,” Dooner said. “‘What kind of kid am I?’ It almost becomes easier to keep doing it once you get arrested because you get so down on yourself.”

For young users, coming to terms with addiction and a first-time arrest can seem insurmountable.

“I just think of all the things I could have done at this point in my life,” said A.C., a slender, doe-eyed 21-year-old from Rockland County.

A.C. was arrested in March, in Elmwood Park, after buying a brick of heroin in Paterson – 50 bags, roughly a gram, the amount of powder in a packet of Sweet’n Low.

Sitting in a stark interview room in the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office with a detective and a reporter, A.C. was beginning to get sick: It had been several hours since she sniffed some heroin, and she was going through withdrawal. Makeup was smeared under her eyes, and she was sweating, itchy and nauseated. A.C. crossed and uncrossed

**“Sometimes,  
I feel like  
I’m talking to  
dead people.”**

SGT. DAVID BORZOTTA,  
AFTER HAVING  
AN INTERVENTION  
WITH AN ADDICT

her legs, played with her cellphone, and avoided eye contact with Sgt. David Borzotta, who was seated across from her wearing a sweat shirt and jeans.

"I never, ever thought this would happen to me," said A.C., who asked that her full name not be used because she hoped to cooperate with the police as a confidential informant.

"My group of friends – my real friends – they don't know anything," A.C. said. "My drug friends are acquaintances." A.C., who dropped out of high school because of her pill addiction, said she knew several people who died of pill or heroin overdoses.

Since turning to heroin a year and a half ago, A.C. had not gone a day without it, and was snorting around 20 bags a day, roughly \$80 worth of heroin. She swore she would "never, ever" inject it, but Borzotta raised an eyebrow incredulously – injecting brings a much faster, powerful high.

A.C. said, with an embarrassed smile, that she had driven to Paterson to buy heroin on Christmas Day. She pleaded with Borzotta not to call her parents.

"If you're not addicted, you don't understand," A.C. said.

"I've spoken to about a thousand of you," Borzotta said, shaking his head. "I understand. This is not a life.

"Here's the deal with heroin," Borzotta said, leaning forward to look A.C. in the eyes. "It leads to jail or death. This was your first arrest. There will be more. And some cops won't be nice. You have got to get control of this."

A.C. nodded.

As he left the room, Borzotta sighed.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm talking to dead people."

### 'Kids get bored'

A handful of those arrested for possession by the county task force were students, often taking online classes or attending nearby community colleges. Others held down full- or part-time jobs, or

worked freelance – particularly in food services and construction.

A large number of them lived at home with parents who provide security and financial support, and were neither working nor in school – like A.C., who said she and her mother fight about her drug habit.

"Kids get bored," said John, a 20-year-old from Rockland County. "A huge factor is boredom."

John was arrested with A.C. in March. The two used to date, and remain close friends, he said. John started using pills at

age 14, stealing OxyContin from his terminally ill father, and has been using heroin on and off for more than two years.

John was sweating, too, but was not as sick as A.C., in the neighboring interview room. He was animated, swearing with abandon as he spoke about the thrills of having sex on heroin, and his determination to quit.

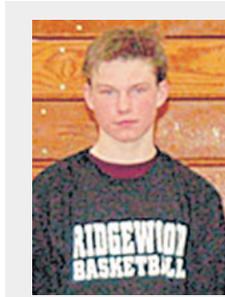
"When I get home tonight, I'm going to drink a few Mike's Hard Lemonades, take a ZzzQuil, and watch some television," John said. "I'm going to make up an excuse for where I was, to tell my mother."

John lives at home with his mother, who thinks he is clean, he said. She gives him cash, though John also said he has savings from odd construction jobs and inheritance. He estimated that he spends \$30,000 a year on heroin, not including the cost of gas for daily trips between Rockland County and Paterson.

John said his habit worsened after local jobs ran dry.

"Typically, when you have recessions, people resort to other things to entertain themselves, just like alcohol use grows in recessions," said Jerome King, who heads the Well of Hope center in Paterson.

The center's syringe access program – which provides free, clean hypodermic needles for drug users – has a membership of roughly 2,500 and the numbers are climbing, particularly among young



**Graham Dooner was a varsity athlete at Ridgewood High School when he began using painkillers after a sports injury. Now an intravenous heroin user, Dooner was most recently arrested last month.**

women from the Passaic and Bergen suburbs, King said.

When the program started five years ago, women made up just 10 percent of the members. Now, that number is nearly 40 percent, even as use among men continues to climb.

“Most women who use heroin are introduced by their boyfriends,” King said.

Of the 90 names released last Thursday by the Prosecutor’s Office for heroin possession, 17 were women. Police also say young women are increasingly using heroin.

Lyn, 25, was among them. After her arrest in February, she continued to inject heroin, and for this reason asked to be identified by her middle name.

When Lyn began experimenting with painkillers two years ago, she was taking classes at a local college and living with her parents in Tenafly. Among her friends, pills were widespread – she knew two kids with sickle-cell anemia, Lyn said, who sold their painkillers to peers – and Lyn was soon addicted.

One day last spring, Lyn said, she came home to find her mother in the kitchen with a police officer. “They said, ‘You’re going to rehab, or you’re going to jail,’” Lyn said.

The 30-day stint in rehab got Lyn off the pills, but it poisoned her relationship with her mother.

“My mother is a definite trigger for me,” she said.

She moved out of her parents’ home and stopped going to school. Then she began using heroin, she said. “I just wanted to have that feeling again,” Lyn said. “I was around people who were doing it, so it was hard, being around those people. I should have distanced myself, but I didn’t.”

Heroin, like other opiates, dulls pain – it brings a trance-like calm, along with a rush of euphoria. For this reason, users say, heroin is a solitary drug. Lyn called it “a relief.”

Now, she can’t get out of bed without it. When she uses, she feels healthy, she showers, she puts on makeup, does her nails, she said.

“A lot of people want to get away from the troubles and problems they’re having,” Lyn said.

She said she wants to quit. “It’s a miserable life, a miserable existence,” Lyn said. “Two years have gone by, and where did they go? Once you abandon yourself, that drug will never give you a rest.”

**“It’s a miserable life, a miserable existence. Two years have gone by, and where did they go? Once you abandon yourself, that drug will never give you a rest.”**

LYN, A TENAFLY RESIDENT  
RECENTLY CHARGED WITH  
HEROIN POSSESSION

Withdrawal from heroin, which can begin within hours of last use, comes with intense physical symptoms: cold sweats, aches, extreme discomfort. The fear of detox, Lyn said, “would push me to continue to do it, to go to Paterson at night, and do those things that in my right mind is not a good idea.”

Lyn drives down to Paterson with her fiancé, who is also an addict – the two live together in Elmwood Park. “It’s definitely not a safe scenario,” she said. Her fiancé has been shot at, she said.

### **Supporting the habit**

This is not an uncommon occurrence, police say. When addicts run out of cash, they hand over electronics or jewelry as temporary payment to their dealers. If they return later to retrieve their goods, there can be violent confrontations.

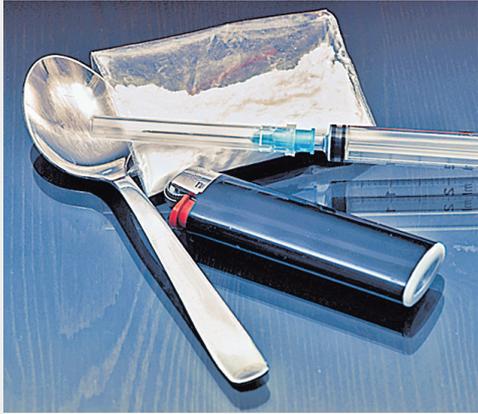
Dooner has twice had a gun drawn on him, he said with a small amount of pride. He said he also takes pride in the fact that he has never stolen anything to support his habit – “I’ve always been a little more business-minded,” he said.

When Dooner started shooting heroin in 2011, he said he was working nights at a bar in downtown New York City, bringing in hundreds of dollars a week.

Every hour, he slipped into the bathroom to shoot heroin, sometimes mixed with cocaine, he said. His boss knew, Dooner suspects, since trickles of blood sometimes ran down his arm, “if I got sloppy.”

He would take the train home to New Jersey in the early morning hours, stopping in Paterson to buy drugs.

Dooner became close with high-level dealers in Paterson, and eventually began to cut pure heroin and sell it for them in Bergen County, keeping



## Fast facts

- Between 2007 and 2011, the number of reported heroin users nationwide increased dramatically, from 373,000 to 620,000, according to federal data.
- The number of heroin-dependent young adults more than doubled, from 53,000 to 109,000, between 2009 and 2011, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.
- Between 2011 and 2012, the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office counted 130 heroin-related overdoses, 38 of them fatal, a steep increase from prior years.
- Of the 28 confirmed fatal heroin or opiate overdoses in 2012, 12 occurred between June and September.

some cash for himself. His addiction accelerated. By the time he went to rehab, last October, he said he was injecting 30 to 40 bags of heroin a day, roughly two-thirds of a gram, which is – he readily acknowledges – an “insane amount” of heroin.

Despite the agony of withdrawal (he said he would “rather cut off a toe” than go through it again), Dooner liked the structure of rehab; he wrote daily in a journal and was happy with the “clarity” of his thoughts.

He was surprised to find that most of the people in his group were young heroin addicts like himself; many seemed to live a double life, with addict friends and “real” friends.

But he picked up heroin again shortly after he got out. “You wake up and it’s just this urge, this voice in your head, telling you, you need this to be normal,” Dooner said.

One night last December, Dooner shot up at home while waiting for a friend to come over for a Knicks game.

His friend found Dooner unconscious on the sofa, a needle sticking out of his right forearm.

Dooner has been arrested three times, but he’s

talked his way out of at least five other “tight spots,” he said. “Once you get to that level, you are a master at deception, a master at manipulation.”

Richter, in April, was seeing a therapist, working full time, and going to meetings, he said. His fiancée, Jessica, said she was “watching him all the time.”

“I have clarity,” Richter said. “You feel better. You’re not depressed.”

Dooner, like Lyn, said he “can’t see myself” as a junkie at age 30.

“I’ve always had this feeling – I think everything is going to work out just fine, as much as what has happened to me should tell me otherwise,” Dooner said.

“I still tell that to myself. Sometimes, I don’t want to admit how much work it takes.”

He plans go back to school in the fall. But before that can happen, he has to deal with his addiction – and the charges he faces for drug possession.

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