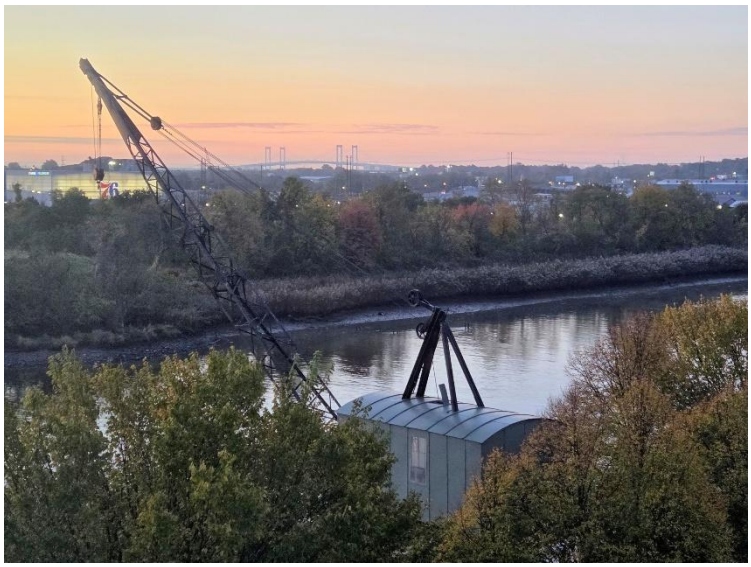
The United States of Addiction: Where Do We Go from Here?



America has long had industries of addiction which profit off the ills of our society. This is a topic I focused on earlier this year in Public Interest or Industry Interest: the Economics and Politics of Minimizing Alcohol Harm. How these processes unfold change generationally. We had lots of substance use in the era I was raised, but the underlying dynamics differed from what we have now. I grew up in eastern Pennsylvania in a steel town during the 1970s and 80s. We lived under the shadow of "the steel" and it was a matter of great civic pride. Our parents and grandparents launched a ship a day in WWII, built the Golden Gate bridge and the skylines of our greatest cities. It was not an uncommon narrative in America. We produced most what the world consumed through the post WWII era. There was also a "work hard, play hard" ethos that ran deep in my community. I suspect a lot of cities and towns were that way period of time.

Alcohol and tobacco use was ubiquitous in my childhood, but not anywhere near the mass drunkenness of the post-colonial era. In the 1800s we imbibed in larger quantities than every other nation in the world. 7 gallons of pure alcohol per adult annually. People were too drunk to function. As described by the New Republic (1979). In 1821 George Ticknor, a Harvard professor, warned Jefferson, "If the consumption of spirituous liquors should increase for thirty years to come at the rate it has for thirty years back, we should be hardly better than a nation of sots." In this context, the use of substances in heavy amounts is deeply rooted in our society. One could argue it is part of our national identity.

I have also been thinking about these cultural facets of addiction, how they influence communities and vice versa lately. My childhood hometown of Bethlehem and the shell of the great steel company is now a casino. While I live in Allentown now, I travel a lot. There is a gas station that is roughly mid-point to my office I usually stop at to top off as I am traveling. It has changed in recent years from a gas station with snacks, beverages and things people may need on the road to a place where addictions get satiated. The counter is crammed with kratom and pills and powders promising sleep, relaxation or energy. There are tiny bottles of booze at eye level, I guess in the event someone needs to reduce the shakes while driving they can take a quick shot. The aisles of the small store are now nearly impassible as a number of gambling video machines have jammed into the space. We have ready access to anything that is addictive at the turn of every corner. Do we really need a smoke / vape shop every quarter of a mile across America? The sales reflect a huge demand so apparently, we do. That is equal parts sad and alarming.

There has long tension between the forces that focus on expanding the markets and profits associated with both legal and illicit mood-altering drugs and the containment of the use of these drugs to protect our young. Guardrails to ensure public safety and to sustain a functional society that is coherent and productive in all aspects of life. Most Americans are aware that we had Prohibition in the US. It was born out of a Temperance movement. History, at least the light version I was taught as a kid framed it as largely a religion grounded movement founded in an opposition to the use of demon rum. That was an element of what occurred, but was deeply influenced by the level of impairment described above by George Ticknor that interfered with the functioning of post-colonial era America. There was a recognition that the prevalence of severe drunkenness was impairing the capacity of our society to function coherently.

We are now seeing a broadly impaired populace but in significantly more complex ways. Alcohol use has decreased across most age groups. Cannabis, which is an impairing drug, particularly when used routinely and in large amounts is becoming more prevalent. Stimulant use is increasing as are kratom and other drugs you can get at that and every other gas station and those ubiquitous smoke vape shops that have sprouted in every corner of every town across the country. But substance use are not even half of the equation. Compulsive gambling, social media and every other manner of delivering a hit of dopamine to our brains for a brief moment of pleasure have become embedded in our lives.

A related fact is that nearly half of US workers report spending much of their time doing meaningless tasks. We have moved from a productive and future oriented society into a compulsive consumption era of an increasingly idle, purposeless and underchallenged people. Consequently, it seems as if large sectors of the modern U.S. economy increasingly depend on monetizing compulsive behavior, habit formation, and attention capture when we consider social media and gaming. These industries have perfected reinforcement loops because they are immensely profitable. What has changed since the days of my youth is the scale, sophistication, legality, and normalization of industries that profit from repeated high-frequency use of whatever numbs you within a society that demands little else from us but to keep consuming our drugs of choice.

These industries explicitly use techniques derived from behavioral psychology, reinforcement theory, variable reward schedules, and predictive analytics. The business model moves well beyond a focus on "sell a product," to now maximize time-on-platform, repeat use, emotional arousal, or compulsive purchasing, or most succinctly "own the consumers." The shift is especially visible in gambling. After the 2018 Supreme Court decision in Murphy v. National Collegiate Athletic Association, the gaming industries expanded rapidly across the United States. The ruling ended the federal ban on sports betting, opening the door for individual U.S. states to legalize, regulate, and tax sports wagering. Modern online betting platforms use real-time odds, in-game wagers, personalized promotions, and predictive algorithms that resemble the reinforcement architecture of social media and gaming apps. The convergence of traditional gambling, predictive betting and data analytics would have been difficult to imagine at current scale way back in 1975.

Likewise, nicotine shifted from cigarettes to engineered concentration and delivery systems. Companies associated with vaping products market convenience, flavors, social identity, and continuous use patterns no differently than traditional tobacco companies did decades ago. They focus on owning consumers before they reach the age of adulthood by targeting their products to children because immature brains are more vulnerable to addiction.

Social media may represent the most historically novel development. Human attention itself became a monetized commodity. Platforms profit from emotional engagement, outrage, novelty, tribalism, and intermittent rewards. The more compulsive the engagement loop, the more advertising revenue is generated. Some critics compare this to an "attention extraction economy." This is made easier within a society that has an eroded sense of connection to each other, a weakened sense of purpose and a malaise of diminished hope for a better tomorrow.

We find our society at a point in which:

- People have more mundane tasks and less challenge in their lives and the culture of "work hard play hard" has become "use to numb out," boredom, isolation and psychological pain.
- Digital technologies allow far more precise behavioral manipulation than existed historically.
- We have monetized these social ills with addictive business models that are now embedded in all areas of daily life.
- Regulatory systems have struggled to adapt and are weakened within a political system that favors the monied industries of addiction over societal cohesion.

So what do we do now?

While things may seem bleak, perhaps the thing we have going for us as a society is human nature. While we are drawn to all that glitters and sooths us, humans want much more than a moment of pleasure in an otherwise bleak existence. We want to matter. We want to belong. People are innately willing to endure hardship as they strive for deeper meaning and purpose. Challenge in this way feeds are lives. In an automized AI world the future is likely to look a lot different than the past. My hometown pride of being a place that helped build and defend America is unlikely to be repeated in the same way, yet the desire across our society for something more significant than brief pleasure exists within us all.

Across human history we have adapted and reinvented ourselves in ways that we could derive a good life defined by facing and overcoming challenges and providing for ourselves and our loved ones. As far as betting, we should not wager against our capacity to build a world from which we derive deeper meaning, connection and purpose from. A world we want the next generation to inherit, which is a goal that helps sustain the living as well as those not yet born.

Some Ideas Moving Forward:

Recovery community has the capacity to generate value to our broader society. Dr Best and I have written about the Cascade Effect: Activating the "Wood Wide Web." We considered the interconnected forest as a metaphor for how recovery grows through relationships, community, and shared resources rather than through individual effort alone. Their C-CHIME model describes a cascade in which community connections generate hope, meaningful activity,

empowerment, and positive identity, ultimately building individual, social, and community recovery capital that strengthens the entire recovery ecosystem. Creating such an infrastructure through the emerging model out of the UK of Inclusive Recovery Cities is spreading internationally as a way to support the development of community in this way.

Other nations around the world have implemented to one degree or another what is termed “Social Prescribing.” This includes the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Ireland, China, Japan, South Korea, Germany, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, Austria, Slovenia, Singapore, and New Zealand. Social prescribing connects individuals through healthcare and social services to nonclinical community resources, such as recreation, gardening, arts, volunteering, exercise, and educational activities. This approach demonstrates how formal infrastructure linking healthcare providers, social services, and community organizations can reduce isolation, increase participation, and build social capital while improving individual and community well-being.

There is also something called the Men’s Sheds Movement**.** The Men’s Shed movement started in Australia during the late 1990s as a grassroots initiative to combat social isolation among retired men. It provides community-based workshops where members gather to work on hands-on craft projects, share practical skills, and socialize "shoulder to shoulder" to improve their mental health and well-being. It provides informal, welcoming community spaces where men develop relationships through shared activities, practical projects, and working alongside one another rather than through structured conversations or formal support services. A systematic review of 52 studies found associations with improved mental well-being, reduced social isolation, greater belonging, and a renewed sense of purpose, illustrating how meaningful activity and organic relationships can create pathways to connection and mutual support.

Since the rise of our species, humans have learned to adapt and prevail across a remarkable range of changes across history. We can do so now, but just as in every other era it will require new ways of thinking about how to meet those challenges and for our society to flourish. We should focus our eyes on that outcome but also do the footwork to get us there. We should be optimistic about our capacity to create a world we want to leave for the next generation and then make that our purpose to work towards. We need a “can do” narrative for our era. It will be good for us and those who come after us.

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