



From Hollywood to Skid Row: What's behind LA County's ballooning overdose deaths?

“Skid Row, in my opinion, is a disgrace. It just really is - that people are living like that - and it's not new.” Nyabingi Kuti

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Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host **Brenda Gazzar**.

(music)

This time on **Code WACK!** More than 3,000 people died of drug overdoses in Los Angeles County alone in 2022 and last October, Hollywood actor **Matthew Perry**, of “Friends” fame, became one of the latest overdose victims when he accidentally died of acute effects of ketamine at his Los Angeles home. Perry's story reminds us that no one is immune to drug overdoses, but who is most vulnerable in LA County and what can be done about it? To find out, we spoke to **Nyabingi Kuti**, director of the **LA Harm Reduction Network**, which aims to expand and enhance access to substance use disorder treatment for L.A. County and especially Skid Row. This is the first episode in a two-part series.

Welcome to Code WACK! Nyabingi!

Kuti: Greetings, Brenda and audience.

Q: So you're the director of the LA Harm Reduction Network. When was it established and what is its mission?

Kuti: We've been around about four years. The mission is to improve and enhance access to opioid addiction treatment in particular, and substance use disorder treatment in general, and it came about as a result of working for Tarzana Treatment Centers and the Drug Policy Alliance and seeing the huge gaps in treatment and the high relapse rates for people that were in treatment.

Q: So a record 3,220 people died of drug overdoses in Los Angeles County in 2022, according to the L.A. County Department of Public Health. That's at least eight people per day, fueled primarily by fentanyl and methamphetamine, according to LAist.com. What are your thoughts on this and who is most vulnerable?

Kuti: Well, this is the essence of my work. The county has had poor results in addiction treatment for a long time and has been exacerbated by homelessness and the fentanyl epidemic, which pretty much morphed from the prescription opioid pill epidemic that was caused by Purdue Pharma and Oxycontin. That's morphed into the fentanyl epidemic and L.A. County as you say over 3000 people died last year, whereas in 2019 there were under 500 people that had died from drug overdoses in the county.

Wow.

Kuti: So yeah, we're facing a serious problem and it's rising drastically year by year. So we're expecting this 2023 to have even worse results.

Q: Wow. That's a shocking increase. What do you attribute that to?

Kuti: To Purdue Pharma with Oxycontin. That's what started 20 some odd years ago.

Purdue Pharma, owned by the Sackler family, was a manufacturer of highly addictive pain medicines, including fentanyl and oxycodone. Using aggressive marketing focused on getting doctors to prescribe their drugs, Purdue Pharma's drug sales soared despite skyrocketing overdose deaths.

Kuti: And the government's corruption and relationship with the pharmaceutical industry that allowed it to happen and the lack of will of government to really get in and do some things that are gonna change the outcomes.

Q: Right. Like in the last few years, is there anything else that fueled that increase?

Kuti: Homelessness. It's like a perfect storm. You know, poverty, homelessness, mental illness, even a person's physical health. Because, you know, these opioids are painkillers and a lot of people have gotten addicted (to) fentanyl as a result of using painkillers, prescription painkillers, even though Oxycontin has been, I would say, it's not used as much as it used to (be). It's still around, but I guess there's been so many restrictions on it that it's kind of not a problem anymore. It's morphed into fentanyl and street heroin. First it went from the prescription pill epidemic, Oxycontin, to street heroin, and then now it's not even heroin anymore. Fentanyl is an opioid, but it's a lot more potent than heroin.

Q: Hmmm. Wow. So you mentioned the homeless population is vulnerable. Are there other populations that are vulnerable to this?

Kuti: The elderly have been vulnerable because of the pain, prescription pain (killers.) Actually everybody's been vulnerable, you know, kids were taking it recreationally and overdosing. It's just been easy access to it has been the main problem.

Q: Hmmm. Okay. So you've said in the past that Black residents on Skid Row are facing a humanitarian crisis related to substance use disorder. What are you seeing and hearing from these residents?

Kuti: What I'm hearing is there is a lack of residential beds there (on Skid Row) and the issue of quality of treatment that I mentioned. Many people that have died from overdoses have been in treatment multiple times. You know, if you listen to people like (Matthew) Perry and other celebrities that have overdosed and died, they've been in treatment before and sometimes over 10 times.

Yes, you're referring to Matthew Perry of the sitcom Friends. His recent death was so tragic.

So that makes you wonder, well, why isn't treatment working? Why are people reluctant to go to treatment? And it's also a mental health component ...

Addiction is a mental health disorder, but some people have even more mental health issues than just addiction. You know, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, and methamphetamines are being mixed with fentanyl. And it's just, like I said, just a perfect storm of what we're seeing. What we're seeing is the end result on the

streets. Skid Row, in my opinion, is a disgrace. It just really is that people are living like that and it's not new.

Q: For those unfamiliar with Skid Row. It's a neighborhood in downtown Los Angeles that as far back as the 1930s had been home to as many as 10,000 unhoused people at a time. Can you paint us a picture of what it's like today?

Kuti: It's just utter poverty and despair and filth, prostitution, open-air drug use. They are also people that are housed on Skid Row in single-room occupancy hotels that are dying and in poverty also. So it basically is something that society has just allowed to happen. It can be fixed, but that, like I said, there's a lack of will to fix it.

Q: So what is the impact of substance abuse on individuals, families, and communities, and do you have any personal stories?

Kuti: Definitely, definitely. I don't think that there's any American that hasn't been touched by addiction. You know, family and friends. I've had one of my brothers who had a serious crack addiction. He has recovered. My dad was a severe alcoholic, and the majority of people that are addicted are functioning. They're not out on the street homeless. They are going to work every day. And there's, you know, there's a wide range of addictions, alcohol, cigarettes, vaping, but when it gets to the point that it affects your behavior and your functionality, that's when I guess it becomes a behavioral problem and not just, you know, something that doesn't affect your personal life.

Q: Right. Do you have any stories about Skid Row that you can share? Tell us about what's being done to make things better and the people who are behind these efforts?

Kuti: When I was working for Tarzana Treatment Centers, I held two resource fairs in St. Julian Park on Skid Row and there was a guy there that helped me to facilitate those events named [Wendell Blassingame](#) and he spent years posting at this park, helping people with their homeless situations and we would just basically call him the Mayor of Skid Row and recently he's taken very ill and I've been visiting him. He had his leg amputated and he's pretty much bedridden. So that's been heavy on my heart.

He's somebody that has dedicated their life to helping people on Skid Row in that condition, and he really is not getting that much support from the community. I've reached out to people that he knows, elected officials that he's worked with. He has all these proclamations and the elected officials know who he is. I've made them

aware of his condition, and pretty much they haven't reached out to help him. So it's kind of tragic for me.

Q: Got it. As for Wendell, was he ever an addict himself?

Kuti: I don't know that for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was, but one thing that he did do, I worked with him on getting Narcan in the park. Are you aware of what Narcan is? And for those who might not know what Narcan is who are listening, it's an antidote that reverses an overdose, and it has saved many, many lives and it's really become readily available here in Los Angeles. They have it in dispensaries at the county jail, and all hospitals and first responders carry it. I gave him Narcan because he had seen overdoses in the park that he was functioning in. And he actually told me he reversed an overdose with the Narcan that I gave him so that was good to know.

Fentanyl overdoses, which Narcan reverses, are so prevalent that L.A. Unified School District made Narcan available at each of its K-12 schools. I'm reading recent articles that there have been – like the LA Times reported in May, oh, that was in 2021, that there were 1,557 pediatric deaths from Fentanyl, including 40 infants and 93 children, ages one to four.

Kuti: Terrible.

Q: What do you want to say about this affecting, you know, not only families but children?

Kuti: It's terrible. It shouldn't be happening. It shouldn't be happening. Prenatal women suffering from addiction should be a top priority for treatment and I worked with women that were in treatment that were pregnant, and they have extra behavioral issues. Theirs are compounded by the pregnancy, their behavioral issues.

And it seems that sometimes children get a hold of their parents' pills and swallow them and can die as well.

Kuti: Yeah, that's happened quite a bit. Yeah. Especially with fentanyl, because it doesn't take much. It doesn't even have to be a pill. You know, fentanyl comes in powder mostly and ... there have been cases where they say a child has gotten a hold of those small amounts of fentanyl and died from ingesting it.

Uh, so sad.

Thank you. Nyabingi Kuti. Stay tuned next time when we dive into possible solutions to the widening U.S. drug epidemic with Nyabingi Kuti.

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