

## Documenting the ravages of the 1980s crack epidemic

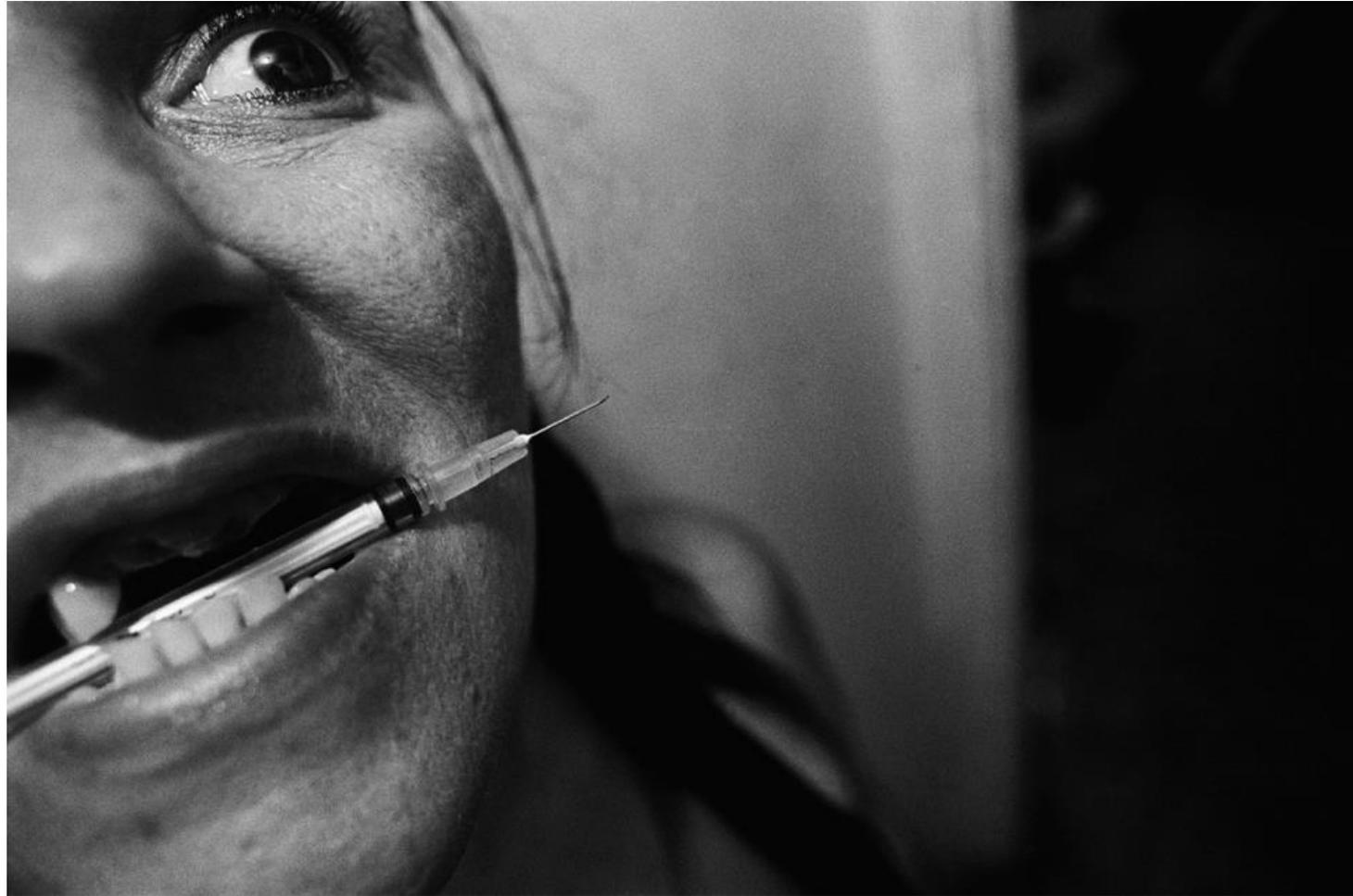
March 23, 2014 5:00AM ET

*Renowned documentary photographer Eugene Richards recorded the brutal realities facing communities affected by crack*

Renowned documentary photographer Eugene Richards bore witness to the ravages of the crack epidemic that gripped the Northeast in the 1980s. His book [\*Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue\*](#) documents the brutal realities facing communities affected by the drug. “The purpose of *Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue*,” Dr. Stephen W. Nicholas writes in the book’s epilogue, “is not to define a national agenda, but, rather, to force a national dialogue.” Richards spoke to Al Jazeera about the lives he saw destroyed on the streets of New York and Philadelphia.

A woman ties her arm before shooting up cocaine in the East New York section of Brooklyn, New York, Sept. 1992. Eugene Richards

*I first became aware of how vicious the drug world is in the late 1980s on a small assignment in Detroit. There we'd find these little boys dead in the morgue with no one to identify them. I learned these kids were raised in drug gangs and when they became too public — people would wonder why they weren't in school — the kids would be killed. That's when I realized that drugs were the issue of our time.*





Two men, one of them carrying an Uzi submachine gun, sit on a stoop at the Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn, New York, April 1988. Dealers and lookouts often positioned themselves on stoops and in hallways at the housing project; the Uzi submachine gun was frequently the weapon of choice. Eugene Richards

*We were living in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, when we saw the drugs washing over. People were being absolutely devastated in the poor communities. My reporting*

*partner, Time-Life correspondent Ed Barnes, and I realized the only way to get into the drug world was to go where it was and stay there.*



*I began documenting drug use in the close-by Red Hook housing project, at that time a black and Hispanic neighborhood being torn apart by addiction. We found where most of the drugs on the street were being sold, and we stood there. It's an age-old process, waiting for someone to talk to you. I think gradually, over time, we became a nuisance, and that's when they let us into their world, when the extent of crack truly became evident to us. You'd see people smoking*

*and just going mentally unstable. Crack puts you in good spirits, but if there's anything wrong with you — or anything mixed with it — it puts you into a truly psychotic state. You'd watch it happen with the addict right in front of you — often very dangerous and very violent.*

Friends pay their respects at the wake of a 15-year-old killed when he refused to give up his coat in Brooklyn, New York, April 1988. Eugene Richards



*We'd get to know our subjects, but you didn't know who they really were or who they had once been. When I was in Philly, we met a young nurse addicted to crack. By the time we met her, she was addicted to the point where she was smoking in front of her children. What we see in my photograph is a pathetic addict, little more than that. I don't think anybody had a grasp on how addictive this drug was. You'd be photographing a guy you knew to be a day laborer, and suddenly he's on the ground chickening, as they used to call it — down on his hands*

*and knees, licking the floor, paranoid that he'd accidentally dropped some of the drug. People were desperate, bobbing their heads up and down looking for those pieces, hunting in their pockets for a bit of dust. It was an illusion.*

A man lights a crack pipe off a kitchen stove in the Red Hook Houses, 1988. Eugene Richards



A one-year-old child screams and thrashes about while her mother smokes crack in North Philadelphia, Pa., March 1990. Eugene Richards

*Crack was a cheap drug, a couple of dollars for a rock. Prostitution was simply a vehicle for getting drugs — very disturbing, because it was truly like enslavement. You'd be chatting away with a friendly, soft-spoken young woman in East*

*New York, and then she'd go out the back door to meet a trucker. The strength of their addiction made your head spin.*



*When you see people using drugs, they always exaggerate this moment of ecstasy. It's not this great spiritual high ... It's just their relief from pain. Crack has little of the needle-pushing, rolled-back-eyes drama that heroin has. It was very short-lived. And then 15 minutes later, the need comes back, and the cycle restarts.*

A young man, whose wife and children have left him, waits for a drug deal to come down in the courtyard of the Red Hook Houses, 1988. Eugene Richards



*In Red Hook, we didn't have much to do with the police. You tried to keep your distance so people didn't think you were a policeman, or they wouldn't go near you at all. A couple times, we were tempted to call the police, like when we once saw a drug counselor scoring drugs. A lot of times people would laugh at the police when they'd bust somebody because they knew they would be back on the street before the cop finished his shift. But in Philadelphia, it was very tenuous, working on the streets and with the*

*police. At one point, I was constantly finding dead people. In doorways, on the streets, in cars. Without exaggeration — you'd just come across a car, and there'd be someone dead in it.*

A prostitute gets high on crack inside a car in the East New York section of Brooklyn, Oct. 1992. Eugene Richards



A mother and her son look out through the smashed window of their apartment at the Red Hook Houses, 1988. Eugene Richards

*Nowadays, at least where I live, you can have a problem with drugs and carry on your life as, in effect, a middle-class addict. But in the poor neighborhoods, addiction can*

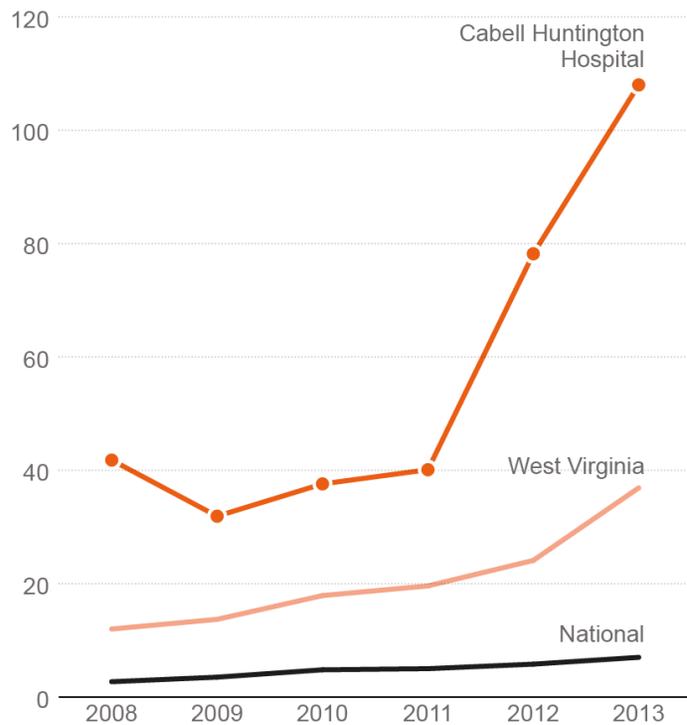
*destroy your whole life; that was the point of "Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue." When I go out to photograph in the Midwest, lots of people are addicted to pills — serious amounts of painkillers, Klonopin and drugs for all kinds of psychological conditions. They don't have to rob anyone. They just go to their doctor, then get stoned to the f---ing bone on prescription drugs.*

—[Eugene Richards](#) as told to [Vaughn Wallace](#), March 2014

## The crisis in Appalachia

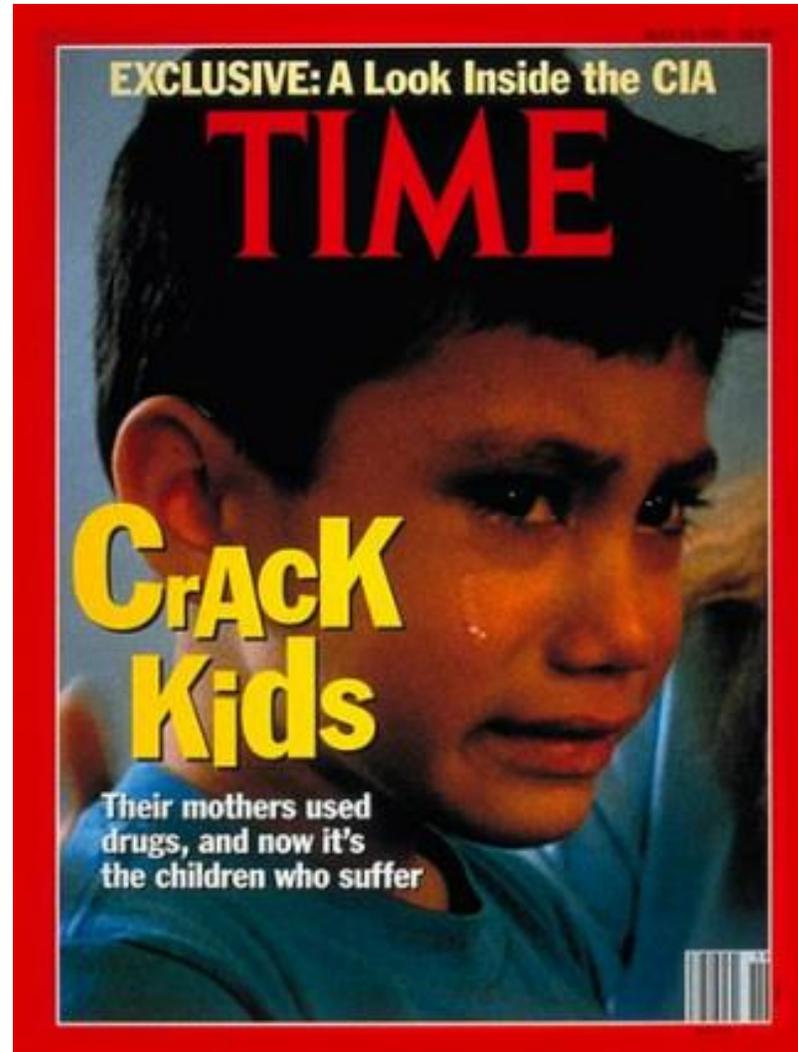
Diagnoses of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, a type of newborn drug dependency, are exceedingly high in West Virginia. At one major hospital in the city of Huntington, babies are born with the syndrome at 15 times the national rate.

**NUMBER OF DRUG-DEPENDENT NEWBORNS PER 1,000 BIRTHS**



Sources: Cabell Huntington Hospital; Reuters analysis of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data

2016



1990

