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TEENS AND PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

An Analysis of Recent Trends on the Emerging Drug Threat

OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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TEENS AND PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

A number of national studies and published reports indicate that the intentional abuse of prescription drugs, such as pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives, to get high is a growing concern—particularly among teens—in the United States. In fact, among young people ages 12-17, prescription drugs have become the second most abused illegal drug, behind marijuana.

Though overall teen drug use is down nationwide and the percentage of teens abusing prescription drugs is still relatively low compared to marijuana use, there are troubling signs that teens view abusing prescription drugs as safer than illegal drugs and parents are unaware of the problem. This report examines this emerging threat by seeking to identify trends in the intentional abuse of prescription drugs among teens.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teens are turning away from street drugs and using prescription drugs to get high. New users of prescription drugs have caught up with new users of marijuana.

Next to marijuana, the most common illegal drugs teens are using to get high are prescription medications.

Teens are abusing prescription drugs because they believe the myth that these drugs provide a medically safe high.

The majority of teens get prescription drugs easily and for free, often from friends or relatives.

Girls are more likely than boys to intentionally abuse prescription drugs to get high.

Pain relievers such as OxyContin and Vicodin are the most commonly abused prescription drugs by teens.

Adolescents are more likely than young adults to become dependent on prescription medication.

PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE

Next to marijuana, the most common illegal drugs teens are using to get high are prescription medications. Teens are turning away from street drugs and using prescription drugs to get high. Indeed, new users of prescription drugs have caught up with new users of marijuana.

- For the first time, there are just as many new abusers (12 and older) of prescription drugs as there are for marijuana. (SAMHSA, 2006)

- Among 12-17-year-olds, the gap between new marijuana users and new prescription drug users is shrinking. Between 2003 and 2005, the gap closed by 5.9 percent.

  In 2005, the estimated number of 12-17-year-olds who started using prescription drugs in the 12 months prior to the survey was 850,000, compared with 1,139,000 marijuana initiates. In 2003 the estimates were 913,000 for prescription drugs, compared to 1,219,000 marijuana initiates. (NSDUH, 2004 and 2006)

- Three percent, or 840,000 teens ages 12-17, reported current abuse of prescription drugs in 2005, making this illegal drug category the second most abused next to marijuana (7%). (NSDUH, 2006)

- In 2005, 2.1 million teens abused prescription drugs. (NSDUH, 2006)

- Teens ages 12-17 have the second-highest annual rates of prescription drug abuse after young adults (18-25). (SAMHSA, 2006)

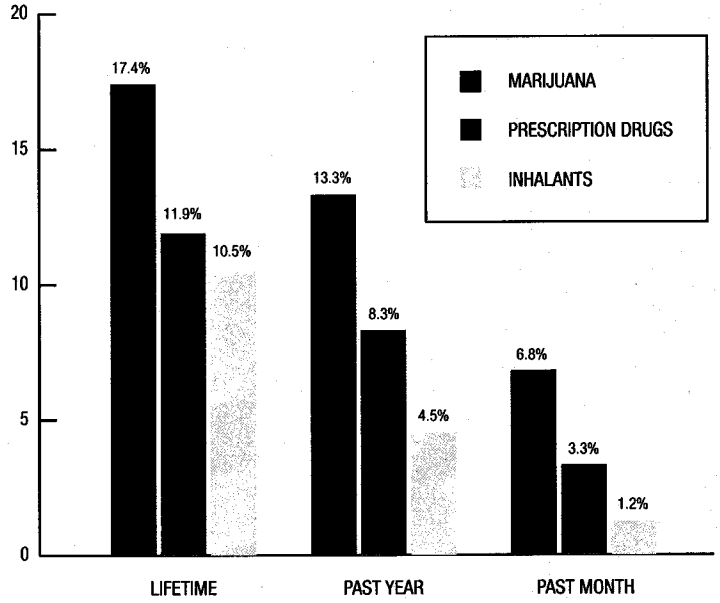
- Prescription drugs are the most commonly abused drug among 12-13-year-olds. (NSDUH, 2006)

- Teens (12-17) and young adults (18-25) were more likely than older adults to start abusing prescription drugs in the past year. (SAMHSA, 2006)

- One-third of all new abusers of prescription drugs in 2005 were 12-17-year-olds. (NSDUH, 2006)

Types of Illicit Drug Use Among Teens Aged 12-17 (Percentage)

2005 NATIONAL SURVEY ON DRUG USE AND HEALTH, SAMHSA. 2006



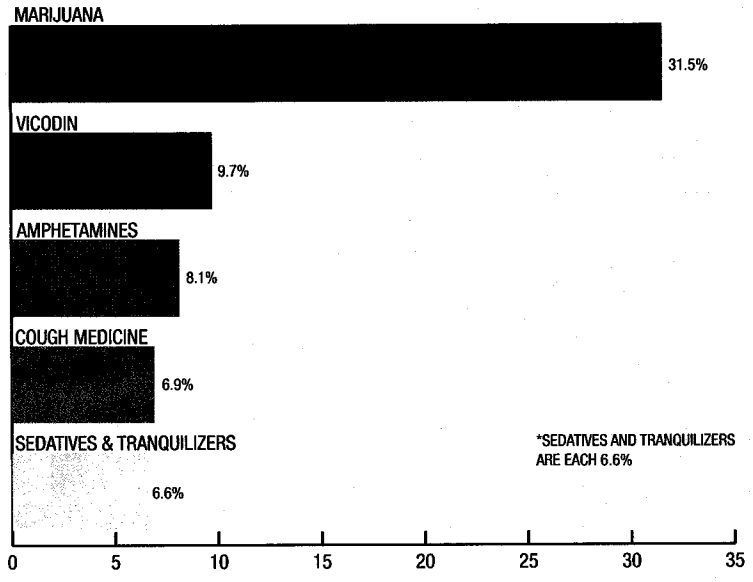
MYTH VS. REALITY

Teens are abusing prescription drugs because they believe the myth that these drugs provide a medically safe high.

- Nearly one in five teens (19% or 4.5 million) report abusing prescription medications that were not prescribed to them. (PATS, 2006)
- Teens admit to abusing prescription medicine for reasons other than getting high, including to relieve pain or anxiety, to sleep better, to experiment, to help with concentration or to increase alertness. (Boyd, McCabe, Cranford and Young, 2006)
- When teens abuse prescription drugs, they often characterize their use of the drugs as "responsible," "controlled" or "safe," with the perception that the drugs are safer than street drugs. (Friedman, 2006)
- More than one-third of teens say they feel some pressure to abuse prescription drugs, and nine percent say using prescription drugs to get high is an important part of fitting in with their friends. (*Seventeen,* 2006)
- Four out of 10 teens agree that prescription medicines are much safer to use than illegal drugs, even if they are not prescribed by a doctor. (PATS, 2006)
- One-third of teens (31% or 7.3 million) believe there's "nothing wrong" with using prescription medicines without a prescription once in a while. (PATS, 2006)
- Nearly three out of 10 teens (29% or 6.8 million) believe prescription pain relievers—even if not prescribed by a doctor—are not addictive. (PATS, 2006)

Top Five Drugs Used by 12th Graders in the Past Year

MONITORING THE FUTURE STUDY, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN. 2006



AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

The majority of teens get prescription drugs easily and for free, often from friends and relatives.

- Nearly half (47%) of teens who use prescription drugs say they get them for free from a relative or friend. Ten percent say they buy pain relievers from a friend or relative, and another 10 percent say they took the drugs without asking. (NSDUH, 2006)

- More than three in five (62% or 14.6 million) teens say prescription pain relievers are easy to get from parents' medicine cabinets; half of teens (50% or 11.9 million) say they are easy to get through other people's prescriptions; and more than half (52% or 12.3 million) say prescription pain relievers are "available everywhere." (PATS, 2006)

- The majority of teens (56% or 13.4 million) agree that prescription drugs are easier to get than illegal drugs. (PATS, 2006)

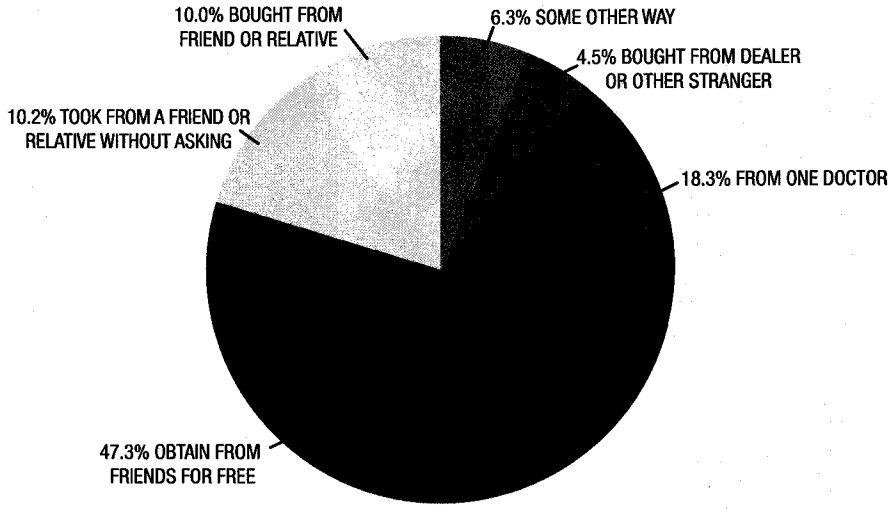
- More teens have been offered prescription drugs than other illicit drugs, excluding marijuana. Fourteen percent of 12-17-year-olds have been offered prescription drugs at some point in their lives, compared to 10 percent of teens who have been offered cocaine, ecstasy (9%), methamphetamine (6%) and LSD (5%). (CASA, 2006)

- 14-year-olds are four times more likely than 13-year-olds to be offered prescription drugs. (CASA, 2006)

- Thirty-nine percent of 14-20-year-olds say it is easy to get prescription drugs online or by phone. Of that total, more girls than boys said it was easy (48% vs. 31%). (TRU, 2006)

Source Where Pain Relievers Were Obtained for Most Recent Nonmedical Past-Year Users Aged 12-17 (Percentage)

2005 NATIONAL SURVEY ON DRUG USE AND HEALTH, SAMHSA. 2006



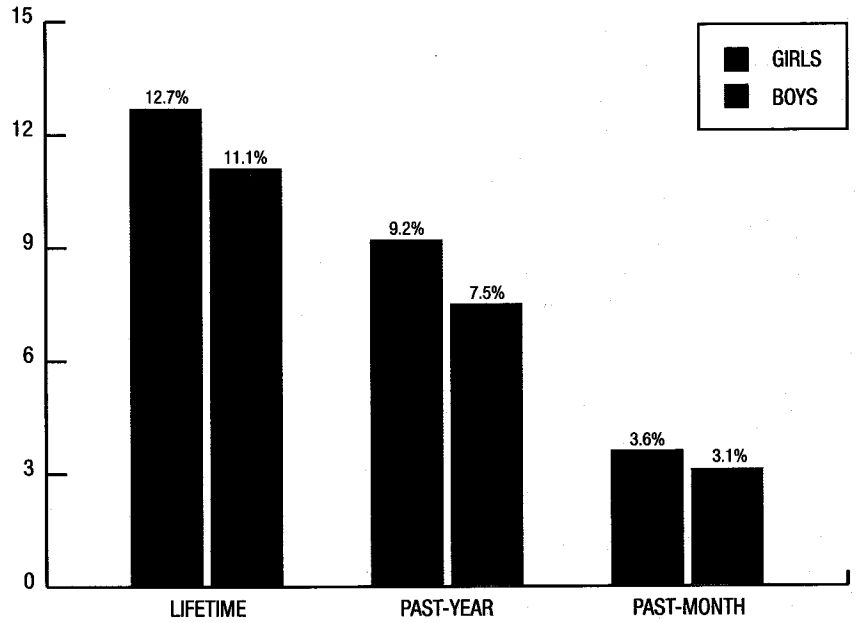
GENDER DIFFERENCES

Girls are more likely than boys to intentionally abuse prescription drugs to get high.

- Among 12-17-year-olds, girls are more likely than boys to have abused prescription drugs (9.9% of girls vs. 8.2% of boys), pain relievers (8.1% vs. 7.0 %), tranquilizers (2.6% vs. 1.9%), and stimulants (2.6% vs. 1.9%) in the past year. (SAMHSA, 2006)
- Among 12-17-year-olds, girls had higher rates of dependence or abuse involving prescription drugs (1.8% for girls and 1.1% for boys), pain relievers (1.4% vs. 0.8%), tranquilizers (0.4% vs. 0.3%) and stimulants (0.5% vs. 0.3%) in the past year. (SAMHSA, 2006)

Misuse of Prescription Drugs Among Teens Aged 12-17 Lifetime, Past-Year, Past-Month (Percentage)

2005 NATIONAL SURVEY ON DRUG USE AND HEALTH, SAMHSA. 2006



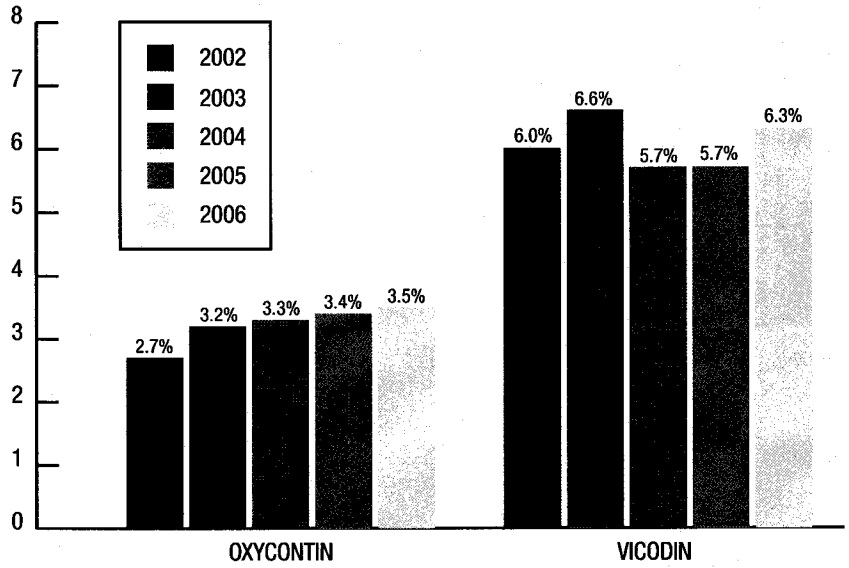
TYPES OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS ABUSED BY TEENS

Pain relievers such as OxyContin and Vicodin are the most commonly abused prescription drugs by teens.

- Pain relievers are currently the most abused type of prescription drugs by 12-17-year-olds, followed by stimulants, tranquilizers and sedatives. (NSDUH, 2006)
- Past-year use of Vicodin is high among 8th, 10th and 12th graders, with nearly one in 10 high school seniors using it in the past year. (MTF, 2006)
- On average, almost four percent (3.5%) of 8th-12th graders reported using OxyContin, and six percent reported using Vicodin in the past year. (MTF, 2006)
- In 2006, past-year abuse of OxyContin among 8th graders exactly doubled—increasing 100 percent over the last four years (from 1.3% in 2002 to 2.6% in 2006). In 10th graders, past-year abuse of OxyContin increased by 26 percent (from 3.0% in 2002, to 3.8% in 2006). (MTF, 2006)
- Five of the top six drugs abused by 12th graders in the past year were prescription drugs or cough and cold medicines. (MTF, 2006)
- Four percent of 8th graders, five percent of 10th graders, and seven percent of 12th graders reported taking medicines with dextromethorphan (DXM) during the past year to get high. (MTF, 2006)
- Almost two out of five teens reported having friends who abused prescription pain relievers and nearly three out of 10 reported having friends who abused prescription stimulants in the past year. (PATS, 2006)

Past-Year Abuse of Oxycontin and Vicodin among 8th, 10th and 12th Graders Combined (Percentage)

MONITORING THE FUTURE STUDY, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN. 2006



DEPENDENCE AND TREATMENT

Adolescents are more likely than young adults to become dependent on prescription medication.

- In 2004, more than 29 percent of teens in treatment were dependent on tranquilizers, sedatives, amphetamines and other stimulants. (TEDS, 2004)
- More 12-17-year-olds than young adults (18-25) (15.9% vs. 12.7%) became dependent on or abused prescription drugs in the past year. (SAMHSA, 2006)
- Abusing prescription drugs for the first time before age 16 leads to a greater risk of dependence later in life. (SAMHSA, 2006)
- In the past year, nearly half (48%) of all emergency department (ED) visits resulting from dextromethorphan abuse were patients 12-20 years old. (DAWN, 2006)

APPENDIX: DEFINITIONS

Prescription drugs that are most commonly abused include three classes: opioids, central nervous system (CNS) depressants and stimulants.

- **Opioids** are prescribed to alleviate pain. Examples include oxycodone (OxyContin), propoxyphene (Darvon), hydrocodone (Vicodin), hydromorphone (Dilaudid) and meperidine (Demerol).

- **CNS** depressants slow normal brain function and are used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders. In higher doses, some CNS depressants can become general anesthetics. Tranquilizers and sedatives are examples of CNS depressants and include barbiturates (Amytal, Nembutal, Seconal, Phenobarbital), benzodiazepines (Valium, Xanax) and flunitrazepam (Rohypnol).

- **Stimulants** increase alertness, attention and energy, which are accompanied by increases in blood pressure, heart rate and respiration. Stimulants are prescribed to treat narcolepsy, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and depression that has not responded to other treatments. Examples of prescription stimulants include amphetamines (Biphetamine, Dexedrine), cocaine (Cocaine Hydrochloride), methamphetamine (Desoxyn) and methylphenidate (Ritalin).

Dextromethorphan (DXM) is a cough suppressant found in many over-the-counter cough and cold remedies.

Nonmedical use, misuse and abuse of prescription drugs are all defined here as use of prescription medications without medical supervision for the intentional purpose of getting high, or for some reason other than what the medication was intended.

Current use refers to use of prescription drugs during the month prior to the survey interview.

ANNOTATED REFERENCE LIST

Boyd, McCabe, Cranford, and Young. "Adolescents' Motivations to Abuse Prescription Medication," *Pediatrics.* 2006
A study conducted through the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Substance Abuse Research Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. The 2005 sample was derived from one ethnically diverse school district in southeastern Michigan and included 7th- through 12th-grade students. The focus of the study was to determine adolescents' reasons for engaging in the nonmedical (illicit) use of four classes of prescription medications and to examine whether motivations were associated with a higher risk for substance abuse problems.
URL: *http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/118/6/2472*

Emergency Department Visits Involving Dextromethorphan, the New DAWN report, Issue 32, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). 2006
This issue of The DAWN Report examines the characteristics of Emergency Department (ED) visits that involve DXM. Included are findings on the age of ED patients who used DXM and the reason for their visit to the ED. Also provided are the rates of DXM-related ED visits per 100,000 population for different age groups and the frequency with which DXM products are found in combination with alcohol.
URL: *https://dawninfo.samhsa.gov/files/TNDR10DXM.htm*

Friedman, R. "The Changing Face of Teenage Drug Abuse: The Trend Toward Prescription Drugs," *The New England Journal of Medicine.* 2006
Article topics range from teen nonmedical use of prescription drugs and illicit drugs, to how teens acquire the pills, to actually using the medication for its intended use without a prescription. The article addresses the perception among teens that prescription drugs are "safer" to use than street drugs. The article is based on The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University and Monitoring The Future 2006 studies. Dr. Friedman is a psychiatrist and the director of the Psychopharmacology Clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College, Ithaca, NY.
URL: *http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/extract/354/14/1448*

Misuse of Prescription Drugs, National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). 2006
This report presents findings from the 2002, 2003, and 2004 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health on the nonmedical use of prescription-type psychotherapeutic drugs. NSDUH, an annual survey of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population of the United States aged 12 or older, covers four broad classes of prescription psychotherapeutic drugs: pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives. Attention is also given to two specific drugs within these general classes: methamphetamine (a stimulant) and OxyContin (a pain reliever). NSDUH is supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
URL: *http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/prescription/toc.htm*

Monitoring the Future (MTF), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). 2006
Monitoring the Future is an annual survey begun in 1976 that collects information about behaviors, attitudes, and values of American middle school, secondary school students, college students and young adults. Each year, a total of approximately 50,000 8th, 10th and 12th grade students are surveyed.
URL: *http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pressreleases/06drugpr.pdf*
http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/data/06data.html#2006data-drugs

National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XI: Teens and Parents, an annual back-to-school survey. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). 2006

For the past 11 years, CASA has been surveying attitudes of teens and their parents. CASA's back-to-school survey probes substance abuse risk. The study identifies factors that increase or diminish the likelihood that teens will smoke, drink, or use illegal drugs. The study surveyed 1,297 teens; age 12-17 (591 boys, 706 girls) and 562 parents of teens, 84 percent of whom (470) were parents of teens who completed the survey.

URL: *http://www.casacolumbia.org/absolutenm/templates/PressReleases.aspx?articleid=451&zoneid=56*

Partnership for a Drug-Free America, The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS): Teens in grades 7 through 12, 2005. 2006

The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study tracks the attitudes about illegal drugs, providing research about the thoughts and perceptions of the Partnerships' target audiences. The survey consists of two nationally projectable samples; a teen sample for students in grades seven through 12, and a parent sample. The 2005 PATS teens' study surveyed 7,216 adolescents from all over the U.S. Data were collected from March through June 2005.

URL: *http://www.drugfree.org/Files/Full_Teen_Report*
http://www.drugfree.org/Parent/Resources/Key_Findings_of_PATS_Spanish

Research Findings: Underage Alcohol Access & Consumption, Internet, Phone and Mail. Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU). 2006

Teenage Research Unlimited, a teen marketing firm, conducted quantitative research to assess minors' online and phone alcohol ordering practices; awareness of Web sites that sell alcohol; assumptions about the practicality of using the Internet or phone to circumvent underage drinking laws; propensity to order alcohol via the Internet, phone, or mail; and their alcohol consumption habits. The online survey was commissioned by the Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of America, Inc. The survey was fielded from April 3-11, 2006, and was completed by 1,001 people ages 14-20.

URL: *http://www.wswa.org/public/media/tru-research/TRUSurvey080206.pdf*

***Seventeen Magazine*, March Issue. 2007**

Seventeen Magazine was established in 1944 and designed for young women in their teens and early twenties as a guide to their lifestyle and entertainment interests. It is a monthly publication with a circulation of more than two million.

Substance Abuse Treatment Admissions by Primary Substance of Abuse According to Sex, Age Group, Race, and Ethnicity, 2004 Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS). 2006

This report presents results from the Treatment Episode Data Set for 2004 and trend data for 1994 to 2004. The report provides information on the demographic and substance abuse characteristics of the 1.9 million annual admissions to treatment for abuse of alcohol and drugs in facilities that report to individual State administrative data systems.

URL: *http://wwwdasis.samhsa.gov/webt/quicklink/US04.htm*