

The New Dealer on the Block: Youth Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs

The nonmedical use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs is a trend that has the attention of the public health community and national drug trend surveillance entities (e.g. DAWN, National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)). Of particular concern is the growing use among the elderly and the adolescent population. While the reason for this growth is not definitive, access to medication via the Internet and the increased prescription of pharmaceuticals are two possible contributing factors¹. To better understand the issue locally, questions were added to the Substance Abuse Monitoring² (SAM) interview instrument in 2007 regarding illegal use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. The results revealed that one-third of the youth reported ever using prescription drugs (33%) or over-the-counter drugs (30%) illegally (not shown).

While the percentage that reported this drug use was higher than youth in the general population who responded to NSDUH (12%), the types of medication abused and the high proportion of youth that also used other types of drugs was similar to national trends³. Specifically, the two most commonly abused drugs were painkillers, including Oxycontin, and tranquilizers. Additionally, all or nearly all of the youth who reported illegally using prescription or other medication also reported using alcohol and/or marijuana, and over half reported using harder drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, mushrooms, and/or ecstasy (Table 1).

Table 1

JUVENILE ARRESTEES WHO ABUSE MEDICATION ALSO LIKELY TO USE OTHER SUBSTANCES

Percent of Youth Who Reported Ever Abusing Prescription Drugs	Percent of Youth Who Abused Prescription Drugs/Other Medicines and Also Used Other Substances		
Painkillers	88%	Alcohol	100%
Tranquilizers	54%	Marijuana	98%
Oxycontin	37%	Meth	61%
Other	25%	Powder Cocaine	53%
Anti-depressants	19%	Mushrooms	52%
Darvon/Darvocet	11%	Ecstasy	58%
Demerol/Fentanyl	9%		
TOTAL	57	TOTAL	64

SOURCE: SANDAG 2007 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region, June 2008

These data are valuable in tracking the changing trends of abuse and the ease of access to such medication. For more information on substance abuse trends among the juvenile arrestee population, visit SANDAG's Web site at www.sandag.org/cjc to view past SAM reports or the most recent report to be released June 3rd 2008.

¹ National Institute of Drug Abuse. (2001). Prescription Drugs: Abuse and Addiction. (NIH Publication No. 01-4881, NIDA Research Report Series). Rockville, MD: U.S.

² As part of SAM, interviews are completed at local adult and juvenile detention facilities with arrestees regarding their drug use histories.

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. Drug Abuse Warning Network: Emergency Department Visits Involving Nonmedical Use of Selected Pharmaceuticals. DAWN Series D-29, DHHS Publication No. (SMA) 07-4256, Rockville, MD, 2007.