



# Research Bulletin

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## Prescription drug abuse, accidental overdose on rise in Illinois

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**D**eaths resulting from unintentional prescription drug overdose more than doubled across the United States between 1999 and 2005 (Paulozzi, 2007). Drug overdose is a leading cause of unintentional death, second only to motor vehicle deaths, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention call these unintentional drug overdose deaths a national epidemic (Baldwin, Franklin, Kerlikowske, Joiner, & Paulozzi, 2011).

In 2009, 1.2 million emergency room visits involving prescription drugs were recorded in the Chicago metropolitan area—a 98-percent increase since 2004—according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2010a). The rate of unintentional drug overdose in Illinois was 8.2 persons per 100,000 in 2007 (Baldwin et. al, 2011). In 2008, SAMHSA estimated that more than 500,000 Illinois citizens use prescription drugs illegally each year.

A 2010 SAMHSA study revealed a 400-percent increase in the nation's substance abuse treatment admission rate for prescription pain relievers from 1998 to 2008 (SAMHSA, 2010b). Illinois treatment admissions for prescription drug abuse also are increasing.

### Prescription drug overview

Depressants, opioids, and stimulants are the most commonly abused prescription drugs. Valium and Xanax, depressants prescribed for anxiety and sleep disorders, are often used illegally for their calming effects. Opioids OxyContin and Vicodin are the most prevalent and are pain relievers that can create a euphoric effect in the user. Stimulants such as Adderall and Ritalin, prescribed for individuals with attention deficit hyperactive disorder, also are used illegally to increase alertness, attention, and energy.

### Controlled substances

The federal Controlled Substances Act regulates manufacture, importation, possession, and distribution of certain drugs. The Act categorizes drugs into five “schedule” classifications. The schedules are ranked in descending order from highest potential for abuse to the lowest. Schedule I drugs have no currently accepted medical use and include street drugs such as heroin and LSD. Schedule II substances include morphine, cocaine, methadone, and methamphetamine. Anabolic

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steroids, codeine, OxyContin, and some barbiturates are examples of Schedule III substances. Valium and Xanax are Schedule IV drugs. Schedule V drugs include cough medicines with codeine.

Almost 17 million prescriptions were dispensed in Illinois in 2010, including 6 million Schedule III and 7 million Schedule IV drugs. While prescription drugs improve the lives of many, they can be addictive, dangerous, or fatal if taken in ways that are not recommended by a physician.

### **Overdoses and deaths**

Unintentional overdoses from prescription drugs have dramatically increased. Hospitalizations for an unintentional overdose of opioids and sedatives increased 37 percent between 1999 and 2006 (Coben, Davis, Furbee, Sikora, Tillotson, & Bossarte, 2010). Studies show that those who unintentionally overdose from prescription drugs have a history of substance abuse, do not have prescriptions for their drugs, mix prescription drugs with other substances of abuse, and alter drugs by crushing and snorting them, or dissolving and injecting them (Paulozzi, 2008).

### **Prescription drug use increasing**

Prescription drugs are often considered safer and more socially acceptable than other drugs. The Partnership for Drug Free America's Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (2009) found 41 percent of teens believe that abuse of prescription drugs is less dangerous than abuse of illegal drugs. In addition, 19 percent of teens (4.7 million) reported abusing a prescription medication at least once in their lives, and 10 percent of teens (2.5 million) reported abusing a prescription pain reliever within the past year.

New youth abusers of prescription drugs now outnumber new users of all illicit drugs except marijuana. The National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse found 25 percent of teens knew of at least one friend or classmate who had abused prescription drugs, a 19 percent increase since 2007 (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2010).

Prescription drugs can be readily accessible via friends, family members, and others who sell or give away their own prescriptions, theft of pharmacies or homes, "doctor shopping," or visiting multiple doctors for prescriptions, and websites where pills are

sold to anyone with a credit card. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America's 2008 Attitude Tracking Study also revealed 61 percent of teens report prescription drugs are easier to get than illegal drugs, up from 56 percent in 2005. More than half of non-medical users of prescription drugs said the drugs were obtained for free from a friend or relative who had been prescribed by a doctor to use them (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010).

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found in 2008 there were 159 websites selling prescription drugs, and only two were certified pharmacies. Eighty-five percent of sites selling prescription drugs did not require a physician's prescription. A 2010 study by the Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies found that illegal online drug sellers have preyed upon 36 million people (1 in 6 Americans) exposing them to the potential of taking counterfeit and unapproved medications.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' national school-based survey, Monitoring the Future, is conducted annually with students in grades 8, 10, and 12. The study revealed illegal use of all drugs, including prescription drugs, increased in the mid-1990s. While most illegal drug use peaked in the late 1990s, misuse of most prescription drugs continued to increase into the 2000s (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2011). In the 2009 survey, 8 percent of 12th grade students surveyed reported use of Vicodin in the past year, and 5 percent reported OxyContin use (Johnston et al., 2010).

### **Illinois trends**

#### **Use of prescription drugs**

A 2008 SAMHSA study revealed pain relievers, such as OxyContin and Vicodin, were the most commonly abused prescription drugs in Illinois between 2002 and 2004. Most users were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. An estimated 12 percent of that age group used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes, and 10 percent specifically used pain relievers.

The annual Illinois Department of Human Services Illinois Youth Survey gathers information from more than 6,000 Illinois 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. Nearly 7 percent of all youth surveyed reported using prescription drugs illegally in the prior year (Chestnut Health

Systems, 2009). This included 4.5 percent of 8th graders, 6.9 percent of 10th graders, and 9.6 percent of 12th graders.

In Illinois, areas outside of the Chicago had higher rates of student prescription drug use. In Chicago, 3.6 percent of students used prescription drugs illegally in the prior year compared to 6.8 percent in the suburbs of Chicago, 8.5 percent in urban counties across Illinois, and 8.7 percent in rural counties. White students were more likely to use prescription drugs (8.1 percent) than black students (3.7 percent) and Hispanic students (2.9 percent). Boys were slightly more likely than girls to abuse prescription drugs, at 7.4 percent and 6.3 percent, respectively.

#### **Unintentional drug overdoses**

A 49-percent increase was seen in the number of unintentional drug overdoses in Illinois from 1999 to 2007. In 1999, the rate of unintentional drug overdoses was 5.9 for every 100,000 persons in the population or 733 overdoses. By 2007, the rate was 8.5 per 100,000 persons or 1,094 overdoses (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Prescription drugs were the cause of the majority of these overdoses.

#### **Emergency room visits**

Illinois hospitals are seeing an increase in patients visiting emergency rooms due to prescription drug misuse. The Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN), operated by SAMHSA, tracks drug-related hospital emergency room visits and deaths across the United States. More than 30 hospitals in the Chicago metro region report annually to DAWN. Emergency room visits involving misuse or abuse of pharmaceuticals increased 98 percent between 2004 and 2009, from 627,000 visits in 2004 to 1.2 million in 2009 (SAMHSA, 2010c). Emergency room visits may include treatment for detoxification, overmedication, adverse reactions, and suicide attempts.

#### **Treatment admissions**

Drug treatment admissions across the state for prescription drugs nearly tripled between 2002 and 2007, according to the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse. In 2007, the most current year of available data, admissions to drug treatment for the abuse of prescription opioids were 11 times higher than the 2002 admissions,

with an increase from 252 to 2,884. In addition, during the period examined, treatment admissions for abuse of depressants increased 42 percent. Admissions for the depressant benzodiazepine increased 78 percent.

#### **Efforts to curb prescription drug abuse**

##### **Legislation**

A number of Illinois laws oversee the use, sale, and supplying of prescription drugs. Individuals cannot unlawfully possess prescription drugs [720 ILCS 570/204] or unlawfully deliver or manufacture prescription drugs [720 ILCS 570/401(a)]. It is illegal to have unauthorized possession of, or to tamper with, an authorized prescription form [720 ILCS 570/406.2)]. Physicians and pharmacies must abide by state laws on prescribing and dispensing controlled substances [720 ILCS 570/406(a)].

##### **Prescription drug monitoring program**

State prescription drug monitoring programs aim to prohibit illegal provision and receipt of prescription drugs by healthcare professionals and patients. Databases are used to monitor the quantity and disbursement of prescription drugs at pharmacies. These programs can track the use of multiple doctors and high dosages and ultimately reduce unintentional drug overdoses.

Illinois and 43 other states have enacted legislation to operate a monitoring program, and 34 have operational programs (National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws, 2011). Prescription drug monitoring programs are funded by the Harold Rogers Drug Monitoring Program administered by the U.S. Department of Justice. One study found that these programs reduce the per capita supply of prescription drugs more than other states, thereby reducing abuse of these drugs. (Simone & Holland, 2006). The database can provide information to law enforcement officers who have probable cause to suspect prescription drug misuse.

##### **Addressing the issue**

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency operates a hotline, 1-877-RxAbuse, to report the illegal sale and abuse of prescription drugs. SAMHSA has a substance abuse treatment facility locator at <http://dasis3.samhsa.gov> and a hotline at 1-900-662-HELP. PrescriptionDrugA-

buseHelp.com provides a helpline (877) 571-5722 and resource center for those battling prescription drug addiction.

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