

## UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES: TEENAGE KNOWLEDGE OF OPIOID AND STIMULANT ABUSE

*Research by Megan Nalamachu*

Prescription drug abuse, most notably painkillers (opioids) and anxiolytics (benzodiazapines), has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. Headlines in both the medical and lay press on a nearly daily basis as an increasingly problematic public health issue. The yearly deaths resulting from overdose have amounted to roughly 15,000 per year out of 2.1 million abusers.

These abusers include a wide spectrum of ages; however, there is a rising concern about the increase in teenage and young adult deaths related to prescription drug abuse. According to a statistic by the Foundation for a Drug-Free World, 50% of teens believe painkillers are less harmful than street drugs. This and other misconceptions exist among many young persons, despite the well-known potential for lethality and long-term deterioration of health and drug dependency from abuse of opioids.

With support from the Institute for Patient Access, student researcher Megan Nalamachu set out to test a hypothesis: that teenage abuse of opioid pain medications stems from a lack of proper education about the negative effects of these drugs.



## RESULTS

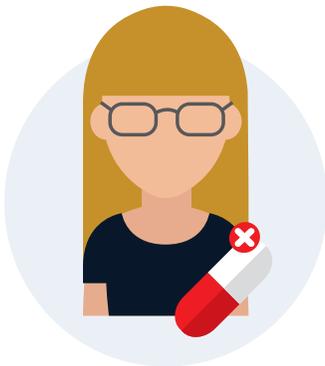


### **Half of the students who responded either knew someone or had personally used prescription drugs for recreational use:**

- 62.2% answered “yes” to using opioids recreationally or knowing someone who had.
- 71.1% reported use of stimulants

An approximately equal percentage of respondents answered that these prescription drugs were obtained from a family member, purchased from an acquaintance, or prescribed by a healthcare provider.

Notably, only a minority of the students reported using opioids and stimulants together or in conjunction with alcohol (11.1% most of the time, 15.6% occasionally, 11.1% rarely, 62.2% never/not to my knowledge).



### **A majority of the students (55.6%) reported that their behavior may have changed if they had more education and awareness of the impact of prescription drug abuse.**

The vast majority of teenagers (95.6%) had heard of the serious side effects of abusing prescription drugs, but only 42.2% of responders reported having any drug abuse education.



### **Unexpectedly, the preferred platform for education in this group remains lectures** in conjunction with existing school programs (48.9%).

The remainder of the students preferred to be educated via web/mobile platform such as Instagram (22.2%), YouTube (11.1%) or “other” (17.8%) A majority of respondents preferred the information, when packaged in media form, to be presented as a video (60%).

## METHODS

A survey consisting of 12 questions was conducted among high school students in the Kansas City area. Questions focused on gaining the perspectives of teenagers about their belief, knowledge, and attitude toward prescription drug abuse and overdose deaths.

Survey responders were between the ages of 14 and 18, with 124 surveys started and 108 surveys completed. Gender distribution was almost equal (53% female, 47% male).

The survey was administered through Survey Monkey after obtaining permission from the school administration. The identities of the survey responders were kept confidential, and the investigator who conducted the survey analysis had access only to the aggregate of the responses and to anonymous individual responses.

## CONCLUSIONS

The survey results confirm the extent of the prescription drug abuse problem among teenagers but also offer encouraging evidence that education can help.

The student researcher intends to extend the survey to a larger student population and seek funding to develop a comprehensive educational program and implement it in schools across the country through a network of teenaged ambassadors.



*Megan Nalamachu is a high-school student in Kansas City, Missouri.*

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