Rural Adolescents Are More Likely Than Their Urban Peers to Abuse Prescription Painkillers

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U.S. media and popular culture historically portrayed drug abuse as an urban problem, but in recent years, there has been more media attention on rural drug issues. Part of this growing attention pertains to the growing epidemic of narcotic painkiller abuse in rural America. Although all areas of the country experienced increases in painkiller prescribing, abuse, and mortality over the past two decades, the increases have been most pronounced in small towns and rural areas. This rural drug epidemic requires immediate attention from policy makers and practitioners.

During the 1980s and 1990s, pharmaceutical companies aggressively marketed OxyContin® and other opioids in Appalachia, and physicians regularly dispensed painkillers to coal miners and other heavy-occupation laborers. In the 2000s, prescription painkillers became more difficult to obtain in Appalachia due to the introduction of prescription drug monitoring programs and a Drug Enforcement Administration crackdown on “pill mills.” Consequently, addicts and dealers from rural Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Ohio regularly travelled along what journalists nicknamed the “Oxy Express” to purchase pills in Florida, where prescribing laws were more lax. Since 2000, prescription painkiller abuse has spread to other rural areas where it was previously uncommon, including New Hampshire and Maine.

Over 1.1 million U.S. adolescents (4.7 percent of youth aged 12–17) abused prescription painkillers in 2014. Among teens, only marijuana and alcohol are more frequently abused than prescription painkillers. Adolescents abuse painkillers more than crack/cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, and methamphetamine combined. Painkiller abuse during adolescence has significant implications for later life. Individuals who abuse painkillers before age 18 are more likely to become addicted than those who first abuse them as adults. Painkiller addiction in youth also increases the likelihood of economic precariousness, criminal justice involvement, poor health, and accidental overdose in adulthood.

The Rural Teen Painkiller Problem

Prescription painkiller abuse is more common among rural than urban adolescents. In 2014, 8.6 percent of rural adolescents, 8.1 percent of adolescents in small urban areas, and 6.5 percent of adolescents in large urban areas reported ever abusing prescription pain relievers. Past year and past month use were also higher among rural adolescents.

Rural teens’ interactions with the health care system increase their risk of painkiller abuse. They are more likely than urban teens to use emergency department (ED) services, where painkillers are more commonly prescribed, and to more frequently visit EDs. Although most teens illicitly acquire painkillers through family or friends (67 percent), rural teens are less likely than urban teens to do so. Rather, they are more likely to obtain the
pills they abuse directly from physicians (23 percent of rural versus 18 percent of urban). Rural adolescents also perceive substance abuse as less risky than their urban peers. Adolescents with less risky attitudes about substance abuse are more likely to abuse painkillers and other substances. In addition to painkillers, rural teens are also more likely than urban teens to binge drink and smoke cigarettes daily.

Our research shows that some features of rural life do buffer rural teens against painkiller abuse. These include stronger religious beliefs and less peer substance use compared to their urban peers and the geographic isolation that limits access to drugs more than in urban areas. If not for these protective factors, rural teen prescription painkiller abuse would be even higher.

Painkiller abuse is often a pathway to heroin use, particularly when painkillers become too expensive or difficult to acquire. Recent declines in adolescent prescription painkiller abuse are encouraging, but civic leaders, policy makers, public health experts, and parents should remain vigilant of the risk of adolescents transitioning to heroin. Heroin contains the same active ingredient as prescription pills they abuse directly from physicians (23 percent of rural versus 18 percent of urban). Rural adolescents also perceive substance abuse as less risky than their urban peers. Adolescents with less risky attitudes about substance abuse are more likely to abuse painkillers and other substances. In addition to painkillers, rural teens are also more likely than urban teens to binge drink and smoke cigarettes daily.

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