



Sources of prescription drugs for illicit use

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Abstract

Objectives: This exploratory study investigated the sources of four classes of abusable prescription medications (sleeping, sedative/anxiety, stimulant, and pain medications) that were used illicitly by undergraduate students in the past year. The relationship between these sources and other substance use was examined.

Methods: In the spring of 2003, a random sample of 9,161 undergraduate students attending a large public Midwestern research university is selected to self-administer a Web-based survey.

Results: The respondents identified 18 sources of prescription drugs that were classified into three broad categories: *peer*, *family*, and *other* sources. The majority of respondents who were illicit users obtained their prescription drugs from *peer* sources. Undergraduate students who obtained prescription medication from *peer* sources reported significantly higher rates of alcohol and other drug use than students who did not use prescription drugs illicitly or students who obtained prescription medication from *family* sources.

Conclusions: The findings of the present study offer strong evidence that undergraduate students obtain abusable prescription drugs from their peers. Greater prevention efforts are needed to reduce the illicit use and diversion of prescription medication.

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1. Introduction

According to the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) data, Americans 18 to 25 years of age reported the highest prevalence of illicit use of prescription drugs relative to other age groups (Office of Applied Studies, 2002). There is growing evidence that the illicit use of prescription drugs has been increasing in the past decade among U.S. undergraduate college students and is second only to marijuana as the most common form of illicit drug use (e.g., Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2003; Mohler-Kuo, Lee, & Wechsler, 2003).

Undergraduate college students are usually responsible for their own medication management and thus, prescription drugs may be readily diverted. In addition, a recent study suggests there is considerable availability among adolescents and young adults of abusable prescription drugs on the Internet (Califano, 2004). While the Internet can provide easier access to prescription medication for individuals who need them for legitimate medical purposes, there are few mechanisms in place to block individuals from purchasing drugs on the Internet without a prescription. To date, there is limited research regarding diversion of prescription drugs and this has contributed to an incomplete understanding of how young adults are obtaining these prescription drugs.

This study focuses on the sources of illicit prescription drug use and considers four main classes of abusable prescription drugs: opioid analgesics, stimulants, anxiolytics/sedatives, and sleeping medications. These classes of prescription medications were chosen because they have relatively high rates of illicit use among college students (e.g., Johnston et al., 2003; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2003) and each class has a high degree of abuse potential (e.g., Griffiths & Weerts, 1997; Kollins, MacDonald, & Rush, 2001; Zacny et al., 2003). This study is based on survey data from a large Web-based study of 9161, randomly selected undergraduate college students and examines the following research questions: 1) What are the sources of prescription medication for illicit use among college students? 2) Are there gender or racial differences in the sources of prescription drugs for illicit use? 3) Are there differences in the rates of substance use based on source of prescription drugs for illicit use?

2. Methods

2.1. Design and sample

The study was conducted during a one-month period in March and April of 2003, drawing on a total undergraduate population of 21,294 full-time students (10,860 women and 10,434 men). A random sample of 19,378 full-time undergraduate students was drawn from the Registrar's Office. The entire sample was sent an e-mail describing the study and inviting them to self-administer a Web-based survey which was maintained on an Internet site running under a secure socket layer protocol to ensure privacy and security. Web-based study design and procedures are described in more detail elsewhere (McCabe, Boyd, Couper, Crawford, & d'Arcy, 2002).

The final sample consisted of 9161, undergraduate students and the demographic characteristics closely resembled the characteristics of the overall student population. However,

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