



Short Communication

Comparing Characteristics of Prescription Painkiller Misusers and Heroin Users in the United States

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We compared the characteristics of three distinct types of illicit opiate users
- Depending on the types of opiates taken, user characteristics/outcomes vary widely
- Interventions must account for the unique needs of these groups to enhance effectiveness
- This study serves as a starting point for examining pathways into heroin/painkiller use

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Prescription painkiller misuse (PPM) is a major U.S. public health concern. However, as prescribing practices have tightened and prescription painkillers have become less accessible, many users have turned to heroin as a substitute. This trend suggests the face of heroin users has likely changed over the past several years. Understanding the demographic, socioeconomic, psychosocial, and substance use characteristics of different groups of opiate users is important for properly tailoring interventions.

Methods: This study used data from the 2010–2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health to examine differences in characteristics of U.S. adults in three mutually exclusive categories of past-year opiate use: heroin-only (H-O, N = 179), prescription painkiller-only (PP-O, N = 9,516), and heroin and prescription painkiller (H-PP, N = 506).

Results: Socioeconomic disadvantage, older age, disconnection from social institutions, criminal justice involvement, and easy access to heroin were associated with greater odds of being in the H-O group. H-PP users were more likely to be young white males with poor physical and mental health who also misuse other prescription medications and began such misuse as adolescents. PP-O users were the most economically stable, most connected to social institutions, least likely to have criminal justice involvement, and had the least access to heroin.

Conclusions: Results suggest the socio-demographic characteristics of heroin users versus PP misusers vary widely, and the conditions leading to heroin use versus PPM versus both may be different. Ultimately, a one-size-fits-all approach to opiate prevention and treatment is likely to fail. Interventions must account for the unique needs of different user groups.

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Prescription painkiller misuse (PPM) has been rising in the United States (U.S.), becoming an annual economic burden of over \$55 billion (Birnbauer et al., 2011). This has led to myriad initiatives aimed at curbing this trend, resulting in small but significant decreases in PPM in recent years (Dart et al., 2015). This drop in PPM, however, has been accompanied by increases in heroin use (Kuehn, 2014), and new heroin initiates have significantly changed the profile of heroin users in the U.S. Compared with previous generations of heroin users, newer initiates are more likely to be white, live in rural areas, and report prior PPM

(Cicero, Ellis, Surratt, & Kurtz, 2014). There is also evidence PPM may serve as a gateway to heroin use (Inciardi, Surratt, Cicero, & Beard, 2009) with some prescription painkiller (PP) misusers transitioning to heroin once painkillers become too expensive or difficult to acquire (Kuehn, 2014).

In a study of Canadian opiate users, Fischer et al. (2008) found prescription painkiller only (PP-O) and mixed heroin/PP (H-PP) users were older than heroin users and more likely to use other illicit and prescription drugs, and PP-O users were more likely than heroin users to be white, employed, non-injectors, and to have physical health problems. However, no similar study has been conducted among opiate users in the U.S.

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Table 1
Sample Characteristics and Differences in Proportions between H-O users, PP-O users and H-PP users, N = 10,201.

	H-O N = 179	PP-O N = 9,516	p ^a	H-PP N = 506	p ^b
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>					
<i>Age</i>					
18–25	27.3 (3.9)	32.8 (0.8)	0.167	42.4 (3.5)	0.005
26–34	31.5 (5.9)	26.4 (0.8)	0.394	32.7 (3.7)	0.864
35–49	24.2 (4.3)	24.4 (0.9)	0.974	17.2 (3.1)	0.188
50 or older	17.0 (5.5)	16.4 (0.9)	0.919	7.7 (3.1)	0.133
Sex = Male	57.8 (5.8)	55.3 (1.1)	0.681	74.7 (2.6)	0.010
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>					
Non-Hispanic White	57.8 (5.9)	69.6 (0.9)	0.049	83.5 (2.8)	<.001
Non-Hispanic Black	16.0 (3.8)	9.9 (0.7)	0.098	6.7 (2.0)	0.038
Hispanic	22.2 (5.6)	15.3 (0.7)	0.224	7.3 (1.9)	0.016
Native American/Alaskan Native	0.1 (0.01)	0.9 (0.1)	<.001	0.5 (0.3)	0.238
Asian	0.2 (0.2)	2.2 (0.3)	<.001	0.2 (0.2)	0.986
Mixed Race and Other	3.8 (3.2)	2.0 (0.2)	0.575	1.8 (0.8)	0.549
<i>Marital Status</i>					
Married	15.3 (4.6)	31.6 (1.0)	<.001	10.9 (2.4)	0.374
Divorced, Separated, Widowed	17.1 (4.7)	15.7 (0.8)	0.781	16.1 (2.6)	0.833
Never Married	67.7 (5.5)	52.6 (1.0)	0.009	73.0 (2.7)	0.362
Number of People in Household	3.3 (0.03)	3.3 (0.02)	0.144	3.5 (0.13)	0.015
Children in Household	18.8 (3.8)	43.3 (0.9)	<.001	33.6 (3.5)	0.005
<i>Religious Service Attendance</i>					
No religious services in past 12 mths	59.7 (5.7)	47.5 (0.9)	0.047	56.1 (3.7)	0.591
1–5 religious services in past 12 mths	21.6 (4.1)	26.1 (0.6)	0.270	32.2 (3.8)	0.065
6–24 religious services in past 12 mths	16.0 (4.6)	11.6 (0.5)	0.338	5.4 (1.5)	0.029
more than 24 rel. svcs in past 12 mths	2.7 (1.2)	14.8 (0.7)	<.001	6.4 (1.9)	0.073
<i>Population Density</i>					
Large Urban	69.7 (5.3)	51.8 (0.9)	0.001	55.0 (3.5)	0.017
Small Urban	26.1 (4.5)	43.1 (0.9)	<.001	41.9 (3.3)	0.004
Rural	4.3 (1.7)	5.1 (0.5)	0.597	3.1 (1.2)	0.568
<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>					
<i>Educational Attainment</i>					
Less than high school	39.7 (5.9)	16.8 (0.6)	<.001	17.8 (2.1)	<.001
High school graduate/some college	58.0 (6.0)	61.3 (1.0)	0.593	76.1 (2.6)	0.003
Bachelor's degree or higher	2.4 (1.4)	21.9 (0.8)	<.001	6.1 (1.6)	0.075
<i>Family Income</i>					
Less than \$10,000	32.6 (6.3)	10.2 (0.5)	<.001	18.4 (3.1)	0.056
\$10,000–19,999	25.1 (5.3)	14.3 (0.7)	0.051	16.7 (2.5)	0.159
\$20,000–29,999	11.3 (2.8)	13.5 (0.8)	0.433	13.8 (3.2)	0.553
\$30,000–39,999	2.4 (0.8)	11.7 (0.7)	<.001	8.4 (2.2)	0.010
\$40,000–49,999	7.9 (2.6)	10.5 (0.5)	0.332	10.7 (2.9)	0.499
\$50,000–74,999	9.0 (2.1)	15.6 (0.6)	0.003	12.5 (2.0)	0.242
\$75,000 or more	11.7 (4.1)	24.3 (0.8)	0.004	19.6 (2.8)	0.109
SNAP/TANF in past year	59.6 (5.7)	29.0 (0.7)	<.001	47.9 (3.4)	0.072
<i>Employment Status</i>					
Employed full time	27.3 (5.2)	52.4 (0.9)	<.001	33.3 (4.2)	0.416
Employed part time	22.1 (4.5)	16.9 (0.6)	0.255	22.4 (3.3)	0.954
Unemployed	21.1 (4.9)	13.4 (0.6)	0.129	26.4 (3.2)	0.372
Disabled	20.9 (5.0)	6.2 (0.6)	0.006	9.5 (2.6)	0.027
In school	4.2 (1.7)	4.1 (0.3)	0.961	4.8 (1.6)	0.834
Retired, homemaker, or other	4.5 (2.2)	6.9 (0.6)	0.299	3.6 (1.3)	0.749
<i>Type of Occupation</i>					
Manual Labor	25.4 (5.6)	16.8 (0.8)	0.131	16.5 (2.5)	0.154
Sales and service	14.8 (3.3)	21.4 (0.6)	0.050	23.7 (3.1)	0.046
Professional/white collar	2.1 (1.6)	17.5 (0.9)	<.001	7.0 (2.1)	0.080
Office work - support/technician	8.0 (4.2)	11.2 (0.6)	0.467	7.5 (2.1)	0.903
Not employed	49.7 (6.3)	30.0 (0.9)	0.003	43.9 (3.6)	0.466
<i>Criminal Justice Involvement</i>					
Ever arrested and booked	67.1 (4.8)	38.3 (1.0)	<.001	71.4 (3.4)	0.506
Currently on probation or parole	22.2 (5.0)	7.7 (0.3)	0.005	29.9 (3.5)	0.212
<i>Perceptions of Access and Risk</i>					
Very/fairly easy to get heroin	82.3 (4.6)	21.4 (0.7)	<.001	81.0 (2.4)	0.784
Approached by someone selling illicit drugs in past 30 days	46.5 (5.3)	26.6 (0.8)	<.001	66.2 (3.8)	0.004
Great risk to trying heroin once or twice	53.9 (5.3)	75.7 (0.8)	<.001	54.0 (3.9)	0.995
<i>Medical/Clinical</i>					
Has health insurance	60.5 (5.7)	73.7 (0.8)	0.025	60.0 (3.5)	0.945
Poor/fair self-rated health	31.9 (6.2)	14.5 (0.7)	0.007	16.6 (2.7)	0.021
Treated in ED at least once in past year	40.1 (5.0)	40.8 (0.9)	0.893	51.9 (3.8)	0.047
Overnight hospitalization in past year	21.4 (4.8)	11.4 (0.6)	0.039	21.7 (3.1)	0.953
Inpatient MH treatment in past year	11.9 (4.3)	2.0 (0.2)	0.027	9.6 (2.7)	0.653
Outpatient MH treatment in past year	16.9 (4.3)	12.1 (0.6)	0.278	18.6 (2.7)	0.752

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