

# Perceptions, Attitudes and Behaviors Concerning Opioids and Stimulants Among High School Youth in Rural Montana



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For more information, visit our website: <https://www.montana.edu/extension/health/opioids.html>

## INTRODUCTION

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In the past 20 years, drug-related overdose deaths have increased by over 500% (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2023). The emergence of drugs like fentanyl and xylazine (an animal tranquilizer intended for use by veterinarians) are major contributors to the rising death toll (United States Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA], 2021). Even in its pharmaceutical form, fentanyl is 100 times more powerful than morphine. Depending on a person's size, just two milligrams of fentanyl can be deadly. Unfortunately, because the majority of fentanyl used without a prescription is made illegally, its users rarely know exactly how much of the drug they are ingesting.

Historical data on teen substance use outlines a destructive path. In 2000, the majority of teenage substance use was cigarette and smokeless tobacco, alcohol, and steroids (NIH, 2000). In 2010, the primary substances of choice were marijuana, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, and alcohol (Miech et al., 2021). Though alcohol remained the most commonly used substance in 2020, teenage overdose deaths increased by nearly 50% from 2019 and then increased by 20% more in 2021 (UCLA Health, 2022). UCLA Health reported that the increasing number of teenage deaths was not the result of greater drug use; rather, it can be attributed to drug use becoming more dangerous. Supporting this, NIH (2022) wrote that though statistics on teen illicit drug use over the past years have been steady and even declining in some categories, there has been a staggering surge in deaths related to drug overdoses.

Montana State University (MSU) Extension is home of the MSU Extension Opioid and Stimulant Education, Outreach, and Training Project. This project was created following the receipt of a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Health and Safety Education office in 2018, with subsequent funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2018 to address prescription opioid use and misuse in rural Montana. The initial work of this team signaled the need for youth-based community opioid and stimulant misuse education, which led to the prioritization of awareness and education efforts. In 2020, our team applied for and received another SAMHSA grant allowing us to provide opioid AND stimulant use and misuse education, outreach, and training to rurally located Montana youth and adults who frequently interact with them. To inform the development of the youth-based outreach and education resources, a statewide survey was distributed to rural high schools.

While we were unable to obtain the desired sample size of 300 in time to write this report, we feel the information gleaned from the 143 individuals surveyed provides important insight, meriting a formal summary. Despite the lower sample size, we have done our best to provide valid information by including only responses to survey questions with no more than 10-12 non-responses.

## FINDINGS

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The 143 surveys received came from 3 different rural counties and comprised 39.2% reported male, 58% reported female and 2.8% reported queer/nonbinary. There was a balanced distribution of respondents between 14 and 18 years of age with 37.1% reporting living "in town," 44.8% reporting living "out of town, not on a farm/ranch" and 18.2% reporting living "on a farm/ranch."

Understanding perception of risk among teenagers can be a very effective tool in targeting outreach, education, and training efforts for this age group. Teens were asked to "indicate how much you think people risk harming themselves physically and in other ways when they participate in these activities": smoking cigarettes, smoking marijuana, trying/using heroin, using cocaine, and drinking alcohol.

- 16.8% reported that smoking one or more packs of cigarettes a day carried "moderate risk" while 67.8% reported it carried "great risk."

- 32.9% reported there was “no risk” in smoking marijuana once a month while 14% and 31.5% reported there was “no risk” or “slight risk,” respectively, in smoking marijuana once or twice a week.
- 17.5% reported there was “slight risk” and 20.3% reported there was a “moderate risk” in trying heroin once or twice, and 6.3% reported this behavior carried no risk at all. Equally concerning, when asked about “using heroin once or twice a week,” 12.6% reported it as only a “moderate risk.”
- 15.4% reported that using cocaine once per month carried “no risk” (4.9%) or “slight risk” (10.5%) and 11.9% reported this behavior as a “moderate risk.”
- 25.2% reported “slight risk” in having 5 or more alcoholic beverages once or twice per week. Conversely, when asked about risk if an individual has “4 or 5 alcoholic beverages nearly every day” 83.2% reported “moderate” (14.0%) or “great risk” (69.2%).

The availability of drugs is associated with an increase in use and overdose in youth (NIDA, 2022). Teens were asked to rate “how difficult it would be for you to get marijuana, cocaine, heroin, prescription pain relievers, and methamphetamine if you wanted some.”

- 59.5% reported it would be “fairly easy” (34.3%) or “very easy” (25.2%) to get marijuana.
- 9.8% reported it would be “fairly easy” (7.7%) or “very easy” (2.1%) to get cocaine.
- 6.3% reported it would be “fairly easy” (4.9%) or “very easy” (1.4%) to get heroin.
- 45.5% reported it would be “fairly easy” (30.1%) or “very easy” (15.4%) to get prescription pain relievers.
- 9.8% reported it would be “fairly easy” (8.4%) or “very easy” (1.4%) to get methamphetamine.

Public health prevention professionals focus on increasing the protective factors (conditions or attributes in individuals, families, and communities that promote the health and well-being of children and families) enabling youth to avoid potential unsafe/risky behavior. The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. These relationships provide the personalized responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that buffers children from developmental disruption (Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, 2023).

As mentioned above, one of the most significant factors in youth misusing prescription and illicit substances is whether or not there is a supportive adult(s) in their lives. To better understand if the teens surveyed felt like they had a supportive adult (parent, caregiver, or other adult) in their lives, they were asked questions pertaining to the adult-centered relationships and interactions in their daily lives. Teens responded:

- 65% reported that “very often” the adult(s) in their lives who look after them expect them to do well in school with only 5.6% responding “sometimes.”
- 53.1% reported that “very often” they feel close to the adult(s) in their lives who look after them with only 1.4% reporting “never.”
- 75.6% reported that they “strongly agree” (28%) or “agree” (47.6%) with the statement “The adults in my school care about me.”
- 79.7% reported that they “strongly agree” (27.3%) or “agree” (52.4%) with the statement “My teachers care about students.”

- 73.4% reported that they “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement “My teachers respect me.”

Teens are subjected to peer pressure unlike any other age group. Survey questions were posed to better understand the environments these teens and their peers operate in.

- 23.1% responded “yes” when asked if “the use of drugs (including prescription drugs) has negatively affected me or someone close to me.”
- 98.6% reported that they “strongly agree” (52.4%) or “agree” (46.2%) that their friends care about them.
- 85.3% reported “no” and 6.3% reported “yes” to the question “Do your close friends get into trouble at school?”
- 61.5% reported “no” and 14% reported “yes” to the question “Do your close friends use drugs?”
- 44.1% reported “no” and 38.5% reported yes” when asked “Do your close friends drink alcohol?”

Risk-taking behavior increases between childhood and adolescence as a result of changes around the time of puberty in the brain’s socio-emotional system leading to increased reward-seeking, especially in the presence of peers, fueled mainly by a dramatic remodeling of the brain’s dopaminergic system (Steinberg, 2008). Understanding risk-taking behavior among teens is important when providing education about substances and drug misuse.

- 49.7% reported they “sometimes” (39.9%) or “always” (9.8%) “get a real kick out of doing things that are a little dangerous.”
- 44.1% reported they “sometimes” (37.1%) or “always” (7.0%) “like to test themselves by doing something a little risky.”

## CONCLUSION

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Greater effort needs to go into educating youth about the risks/hazards associated with substance use – this includes even one-time use. With 17.5% of high schoolers reporting only a “slight risk” and 20.3% reporting there was a “moderate risk” in trying heroin once or twice, along with 6.3% reporting this behavior carried **no risk at all**, it is more imperative than ever to spread the word about the dangers of opioid use. With the drastic rise in fentanyl-laced substances (many times unknowingly to the user), and subsequently, a large increase in overdose deaths nationwide, choosing to “try just once” has taken on new meaning.

Equally concerning, when asked about “using heroin once or twice a week,” 12.6% reported it as only a “moderate risk.” Researchers have found that taking opioid medications for more than a few days increases your risk of long-term use, which increases your risk of addiction (Mayo Clinic, 2023). Because of this, awareness and education need to infiltrate the home and school environment, to reach as many adult caregivers as possible.

Underage drinking education and awareness efforts targeted toward youth are as important now as they have been in the past. Our survey revealed that 14.0% of high schoolers reported that “4 or 5 alcoholic beverages nearly every day” carried only a “moderate” risk. Drinking among youth is a serious public health problem. Alcohol is the most widely used substance among America’s youth and can cause them enormous health and safety risks. Youth ages 12 to 20 drink 3.4% of all alcohol consumed in the United States (NIH NIAAA, 2023). Although youth drink less often than adults, when they do drink, they drink more. More than 90% of all alcohol drinks consumed by youth are consumed through binge drinking, with 3.2 million youth ages 12 to 20 reporting binge drinking at least once in the past month (NIH NIAAA, 2023). In 2021, approximately 613,000

youth ages 12 to 20 reported binge drinking on 5 or more days over the past month (NIH NIAAA, 2023). Excessive drinking is responsible for more than 3,900 deaths and 225,000 years of potential life lost among people under age 21 each year (CDC, Alcohol and Public Health, 2022).

When evaluating responses to youth perceptions about cigarettes, it can be assumed that public health prevention efforts over the past several decades have made an impact when compared to youths' perception of risk involving other substances/drugs. Among the youth that were surveyed, 84.6% reported that smoking one or more packs of cigarettes a day carried "moderate risk" (16.8%) or "great risk" (67.8%).

It is important to note that although the data have indicated stable or declining use of illicit drugs among young people over many years, other research has reported a recent dramatic rise in overdose deaths among young people ages 14-18 (NIDA, 2022). This increase is largely attributed to illicit **fentanyl**, a potent synthetic drug, contaminating the supply of counterfeit pills made to resemble prescription medications like benzodiazepines, ADHD medications, and opioids (NIDA, 2022). The fast-growing increase in the presence of fentanyl in the drug supply is of major concern. Though the data indicate that drug use is not becoming more common among young people than it has been in the past (NIDA, 2022), the increase in overdose deaths among this population suggest that drug use is becoming more dangerous than ever before. As stated by Nora Volkow, M.D., director of the NIDA, "It is absolutely crucial to educate young people that pills purchased via social media, given to someone by a friend, or obtained from an unknown source may contain deadly fentanyl" (NIDA, 2022, np).

We can all do our part to reduce the ease with which youth obtain harmful substances like opioids, stimulants, alcohol, and tobacco. The survey responses regarding how difficult it would be to get certain drugs, was eye opening and should be emphasized. With 6.3% reporting it would be "fairly easy" or "very easy" to get heroin, 45.5% reported it would be "fairly easy" or "very easy" to get prescription pain relievers (opioids) and 9.8% reporting it would be "fairly easy" or "very easy" to get methamphetamine, adults at the community level need to be made aware of this information. All adults need to be vigilant about properly storing and disposing of their household medications and talking with the youth in the home about the dangers associated with these substances. For more information about proper storage and disposal, visit the MSU Extension website: <https://www.montana.edu/extension/health/opioids.html>.

Lastly, and arguably the most important factor in youth misusing prescription and illicit substances is having a supportive adult in their lives. The survey responses indicate that parent education sessions focusing on education specifically about teens as well as training about how to effectively communicate with their teen, is in need. Approximately 75% of teens indicated that teachers and adults in their school care about them and the other students and respect them - compared to 53% of teens reporting that "very often" they feel close to the adult(s) in their lives who look after them. When considering the reasons for these responses, we must consider that teachers and adults in the school setting are focused on the youth all day. This is their purpose. Parents and caregivers, many times, are stretched between work, parenting, household chores, caring for an aging parent, etc. For this reason, education materials and resources need to be developed with these circumstances in mind. Providing education, support, resources and the necessary tools to overburdened parents and caregivers would likely result in better relationships with the teens in their life. Schools working hand-in-hand with parents and caregivers to support and aid in youth success should be the ultimate goal for everyone.

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