

# Surprising findings in a study surrounding non-medical use of prescription drugs

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Over the last decade, there has been a surge in the use of non-prescription drugs.

When Thomas Stewart and Mark Reed began analyzing data pertaining to non-medical use of prescription drugs, they had certain hypotheses. However, after months of careful analysis, many of their findings

contradicted their original beliefs.

"I found it very surprising that individuals who had recently experienced a financial hardship were more likely to engage in abuse of these drugs," Stewart said.

Stewart graduated from SDSU in 2014 with a master's degree in social work. Today, he is a social worker at Atascadero State hospital. Reed is an associate professor in SDSU's School of Social Work.

Stewart and Reed used information gathered by researchers at University of North Carolina to analyze non-prescription [drug](#) abuse in Americans between the ages of 18 and 25.

The pair's inspiration for researching this subject came from Stewart's observations of society.

"I had seen a lot on the news about pain killers and drug abuse," Stewart said. "I felt like there was still a lack of information on what demographic is using and how they are accessing these drugs."

## **A true epidemic**

Stewart and Reed were specifically interested in looking at data that was nationally representative of late adolescents and [young adults](#).

Over the last decade, there has been a surge in the use of non-[prescription drugs](#), according to Reed. The term non-prescription or non-medical use means that the drugs were not prescribed to the individual or not prescribed for that purpose.

"More people die from prescription overdoses than illicit anxiety prescription stimulants, opioids and depressants," Reed said.

When looking at how these drugs were accessed, Reed and Stewart found what they call "kind of a mixed bag" of factors.

They measured socioeconomic factors including parental level of education; respondent's level of education; access to [health insurance](#); and if the individual had faced [financial hardship](#) in the previous four months.

More than 17 percent of the respondents said they had used a prescription drug without a prescription at some point in their lives.

The most commonly abused prescription drugs were painkillers and prescription opioids. Nearly 15 percent of respondents had used these drugs, which are considered the most deadly, according to Reed.

## **Surprising Findings**

Nearly all of the hypotheses that Stewart and Reed made at the onset of their work were disproved as they dove deeper into the research.

They found that a parent's level of education was a stronger determinant of a respondent's behavior than their own level of education. As their parent's level of education increased, so did the use of non-prescription tranquilizers and stimulants.

Health insurance was negatively associated with the use of non-prescription drugs. Meaning people with better insurance and easier access to these drugs were less likely to abuse these drugs.

People who had experienced recent financial hardships were more likely than their peers to seek out non-prescription drugs.

## Plausible Explanations

"Parental socioeconomic status is something that exerts a lifelong influence," Reed said.

If young children have access to drugs they could develop an early dependency that affects their future lives.

Reed and Stewart found that patterns in abusive behavior start early on. A proactive approach to preventing non-prescription drug abuse in young adults would include a multifaceted approach, according to Reed.

Accessibility is a major factor in the issue of non-prescription [drug abuse](#). Many states have strong information logging regulations, said Reed, which help keep track of who has these drugs and who is allowed to take them. If this logging is done correctly, he believes that less abuse of these drugs would continue.

Because the most susceptible demographic in America is young adults, Reed encourages preventative educational programming and prescription drug monitoring programs in high schools.

Provided by San Diego State University

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