

College students may face pressures from opioid epidemic's secondary effects

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About one in five college students reported in a survey that they knew someone who was addicted to pain medications, and nearly a third said they knew somebody who overdosed on painkillers or heroin, according to a team of undergraduate Penn State Lehigh Valley researchers.

This secondary exposure to [opioid](#) abuse may shine a light on the collateral damage that is often left out of the current debate about the epidemic, said Jennifer Parker, associate professor of sociology, Penn State Lehigh Valley.

"Since the beginning of the [opioid epidemic](#), public debate and prevention strategies have focused on the primary victims, misusers themselves, while surprisingly little attention has been paid to the burdens felt and experienced by those who are intimately or socially tied to them," said Parker, who advised the group of researchers presenting at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting today (Aug. 11) in Philadelphia.

According to the researchers, most of the 118 students who completed a survey admitted that they had been in some way exposed to people who misuse drugs and alcohol. Of those, 20.5 percent said they currently know someone who is addicted to pain medication. About 32.5 percent said they knew somebody who overdosed on either painkillers or heroin.

Erica Hughes, an undergraduate student in Health Policy Administration, added about 15 percent of the students reported worrying that someone

they knew may be misusing pain medication.

"I was surprised by how many students report close ties to people who are addicted to or have overdosed on opioids," Hughes said. "It makes me sad to think that so many are carrying around this worry because being a student in today's world is already hard enough."

Hughes added that dealing with issues connected to their exposure to the effects of [opioid abuse](#) may be particularly difficult for college students. Many college students already face increased pressure from rising tuition costs and [student](#) debt, along with fears about the job market, she added.

Amanda Borges, a 2018 graduate in Health Policy Administration, said that the findings might raise awareness about the extent of the opioid crisis and offer insight into better ways to address it.

"The general public should know how devastating this crisis has been and how it impacts all communities and social classes including college students," said Borges.

Gathering information on all aspects of the opioid crisis may help better allocate resources to help communities, added Kirsten Mears, also a 2018 graduate in Health Policy Administration.

"The more we know, the better we are able to help and identify how particular communities, especially our poorest, may have certain disadvantages in this epidemic because of lesser resources and lack of [health](#) insurance," said Mears.

According to the researchers, gender may also play a role in how [college students](#) report their exposures to the opioid problem. For example, women were twice as likely to report having intimate ties to those who misuse or overdose on opioids, the researchers said.

Shanice Clark and a team of 15 undergraduate students in Health Policy Administration also contributed to the study.

The researchers collected data from surveys filled out by students at a university in a region particularly hard hit by the opioid crisis.

Of the approximate 130 surveys were passed out, participants completed 122. Of those, the researchers determined that 118 surveys were both completed and valid.

The researchers said that future research should look at whether secondary exposure to opioids impacts the students' mental and physical health, as well as their academic performance.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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