

Millions of children exposed to opioid misuse at home, new study reveals

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Lindsey Bullinger. Credit: Georgia Institute of Technology

More than 3.8 million U.S. children live with an adult who is inappropriately using opioids, according to a new estimate from the Georgia Institute of Technology's School of Public Policy.

The study, which spans the years 2002 to 2017, also found that while fewer [children](#) are living with someone who casually misuses opioids, the number living with adults exhibiting signs of more serious abuse increased by 30 percent and the number living with heroin users rose 200 percent.

The study is the first to examine the number of children living with someone inappropriately using opioids.

"This study reveals the staggering extent of the [opioid](#) crisis on children in the United States, an epidemic that is likely to have costly long-term implications for child welfare agencies, schools, the health care sector, and most of all, on children," said Georgia Tech Assistant Professor Lindsey Bullinger, who co-authored the study with Coady Wing of Indiana University. "It is crucial that policymakers and practitioners have this information to understand the extent of child exposure to opioid abuse at home."

Exposure to Opioids Falling, but More Children Living With Heroin Users

The survey found that the number of children in the United States living with someone misusing opioids declined, falling from 3.43 million in 2002 to 3.33 million in 2017. However, the number of children living with someone with opioid use disorder increased by 30 percent, rising from 423,000 in 2002 to 548,000 in 2017

Opioid misuse is defined as the use, even once, of opioids prescribed for someone else or only for the feeling it causes. Opioid use disorder applies to someone who exhibits symptoms of abuse or dependency.

The study, which draws on data from the National Survey of Drug Use and Health and the American Community Survey, also found that

198,000 children were living with a heroin user in 2017. That number was up 200 percent from 2002.

Among other findings contained in the study:

- Among children living with an adult who abuses opioids, about a one third likely live with multiple adult abusers of opioids.
- The decline in opioid misuse is largest among one-child households.
- Among adults living in childless households, about 52 in every 1,000 misused opioids in 2017. In households with children, about 46 of every 1,000 adults misused opioids. That number fell over 15 years examined in the study.
- Opioid use disorder is much less common. About 8 of every 1,000 adults living in households with children had [opioid use disorder](#) in 2017. That [number](#) rose between 2002 and 2017.
- The rate of heroin use in childless households grew from two in every 1,000 adults in 2002 to 5.6 in every 1,000 adults in 2017.

Recent Georgia Tech Research Examined Opioid Epidemic Costs

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, more than 130 people die each day from opioid overdoses. The Institute, citing the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, estimates prescription [opioid abuse](#) exacts an economic toll of \$78.5 billion a year, including the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement.

In 2018, Georgia Tech Assistant Professor Scott Ganz, Bullinger's colleague in the School of Public Policy, published research estimating that the county- and state-level costs related to the opioid epidemic can be as much as \$8,734 per resident.

Among other findings, Ganz' and Alex Brill, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, determined that Iowa and Nebraska had the lowest per resident costs among states, while West Virginia had the highest overall cost.

Bullinger and Wing's paper, "How Many Children Live with Adults with Opioid Use Disorder," is in the September 2019 edition of the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*.

More information: Lindsey Rose Bullinger et al. How many children live with adults with opioid use disorder?, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2019.06.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2019.06.016)

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