

# Big drop in US kids, teens misusing prescription meds

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Misuse of illicit prescription drugs is falling dramatically among U.S. high school students, a new study says.

The percentage of seniors who say they've misused prescription drugs in the past year has dropped to 2% in 2022, down from 11% back in 2009, researchers reported July 24 in the [JAMA](#).

"To put these findings in context, the reduction over the past decade was like going from 1 in every 9 high school students using prescription drugs non-medically down to 1 in every 40 high school students," said researcher Sean Esteban McCabe, director of the University of Michigan Center for the Study of Drugs, Alcohol, Smoking and Health.

For the study, researchers tracked trends regarding the three types of prescription drugs most commonly misused by teens—opioids, stimulants (for example, Ritalin and Adderall) and benzodiazepines (drugs such as Xanax and Valium). They used data collected by the University of Michigan as part of an annual survey of [high school students](#).

Not only has illicit use declined, but even legitimate use for medical reasons has dropped among teens.

About 16% of [high school seniors](#) said in 2022 they've never been prescribed one of these drugs for health reasons, down from 24% in 2009, researchers found.

The means of getting a prescription drug for illicit use also has changed over time, with signs indicating it's gotten harder for teens to find these pills, researchers report.

About 37% of teens now say they got a prescription for drugs they've misused, whereas in 2009 teens said they most often got the drugs from a friend.

Further, the percentage of teens who say they have multiple sources for

illicit prescription drugs has declined from 56% in 2009 to 29% in 2022.

And the percentage of [teens](#) who think it would be impossible to get prescription drugs for misuse increased from 36% to 49%.

"Nearly half of kids say it's probably impossible to get these drugs if they want to use them non-medically right now. That's a big chunk of the adolescent population, and this is just off the table," said study co-author Philip Veliz, a research associate professor of nursing with the University of Michigan.

These trends could be due to [school closures](#) during the pandemic, which limited the amount of contact students had with one another, McCabe said. Opportunities to sell or give away [prescription drugs](#) to friends declined.

It also could be due to tightened regulations and practices around prescribing these drugs as a result of the opioid epidemic, researchers added.

"Prescribing practices have changed dramatically because we had an opioid epidemic, which turned into a heroin epidemic, and we're still reeling from that, especially with fentanyl," Veliz said in a university news release. "A lot of this also has to do with parents having better knowledge and oversight of these medications."

**More information:** McCabe et al. Adolescent Use, Diversion Sources, and Perceived Procurement Difficulty of Prescription Medications, *JAMA*, [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2024.12030](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2024.12030)  
[jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2821540](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2821540)

The Partnership to End Addiction has more on [teen drug use](#).

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