

Peers, but not peer pressure, key to prescription drug misuse among young adults

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Current efforts to prevent prescription drug misuse among young adults need to consider peers—but not peer pressure—according to a Purdue University study.

"With the 18-29 age group we may be spending unnecessary effort working a peer pressure angle in prevention and intervention efforts. That does not appear to be an issue for this age group," said study co-author Brian Kelly, a professor of sociology and anthropology who studies drug use and youth cultures. "Rather, we found more subtle components of the peer context as influential. These include peer drug associations, peers as points of drug access, and the motivation to misuse prescription drugs to have pleasant times with friends."

This research, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), will be presented at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association by study co-author Alexandra Marin, a Purdue sociology doctoral student.

Prescription drug misuse has risen considerably during the 21st century and is the most commonly abused substance after alcohol and marijuana for people 14 and older, according to NIDA. Popular prescription drugs that are most frequently misused are sedatives, painkillers, and stimulants.

"People normally think about peer pressure in that peers directly and actively pressure an individual to do what they are doing," said Kelly,

who also is director of Purdue's Center for Research on Young People's Health. "This study looks at that form of direct social pressure as well as more indirect forms of social pressure. We find that friends are not actively pressuring them, but it's a desire to have a good time alongside friends that matters."

The findings, collected from 2011-13, are based on survey interviews with 404 adults ages 18 to 29 who misused prescription drugs in the past 90 days. Two-hundred fourteen in-person interviews also were conducted. These individuals were recruited from popular nightlife locations such as bars, clubs, and lounges in New York City. Average misuse of prescription drugs, such as painkillers, sedatives and stimulants, was 38 times in the past 90 days.

This study evaluated the role of peer factors on three prescription [drug misuse](#) outcomes: the frequency of misuse; administering drugs in ways other than swallowing, such as sniffing, smoking, and injecting the drugs; and symptoms of dependency on prescription drugs.

"We found that peer drug associations are positively associated with all three outcomes," Kelly said. "If there are high perceived social benefits or low perceived social consequences within the peer network, they are more likely to lead to a greater frequency of misuse, as well as a greater use of non-oral methods of administration and a greater likelihood of displaying symptoms of dependence. The motivation to misuse prescription drugs to have a good time with friends is also associated with all three outcomes. The number of sources of drugs in their peer group also matters, which is notable since sharing [prescription drugs](#) is common among these [young adults](#)."

Kelly and Marin collaborated with Purdue assistant professor of sociology Michael Vuolo, as well as professors Brooke E. Wells and Jeffrey T. Parsons from the City University of New York's Hunter

College.

More information: The paper, "Prescription Drug Misuse Among Young Adults: The Role of Peer Relationships," will be presented on Saturday, Aug. 16, at 10:30 a.m. PDT in San Francisco at the American Sociological Association's 109th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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