

# RESEARCH BRIEF

No. 32: November 2022



## YOUNG ADULT USE OF OPIOIDS AND OTHER SUBSTANCES

**Margaret Kuklinski, PhD**  
*Director*

**Jennifer Bailey, PhD**  
*Assistant Director*

### MISSION OF SDRG

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- Conduct research on factors that influence development
- Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- Study service systems and work to improve them
- Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

The opioid epidemic (which includes opioid misuse, or the use of heroin and nonmedical use of prescription opioids) continues to gravely affect communities throughout the United States. Young adults have been particularly impacted by the epidemic. For example, about 20% of young adult deaths in 2016 involved opioids, and in 2015–2018 young adults had greater odds of being diagnosed with opioid use disorder compared to older adults.

To best inform efforts to prevent opioid misuse, SDRG researchers wanted to understand whether risk factors for opioid misuse are opioid specific, or whether they might in fact be broader, reflecting a general tendency towards substance use. If so, then prevention programs targeting things that generally increase risk for drug use (like viewing drug use as positive or not harmful, or having many close friends who use drugs) might also work in preventing opioid misuse. Such programs already exist and can be implemented right away.

### THE STUDY

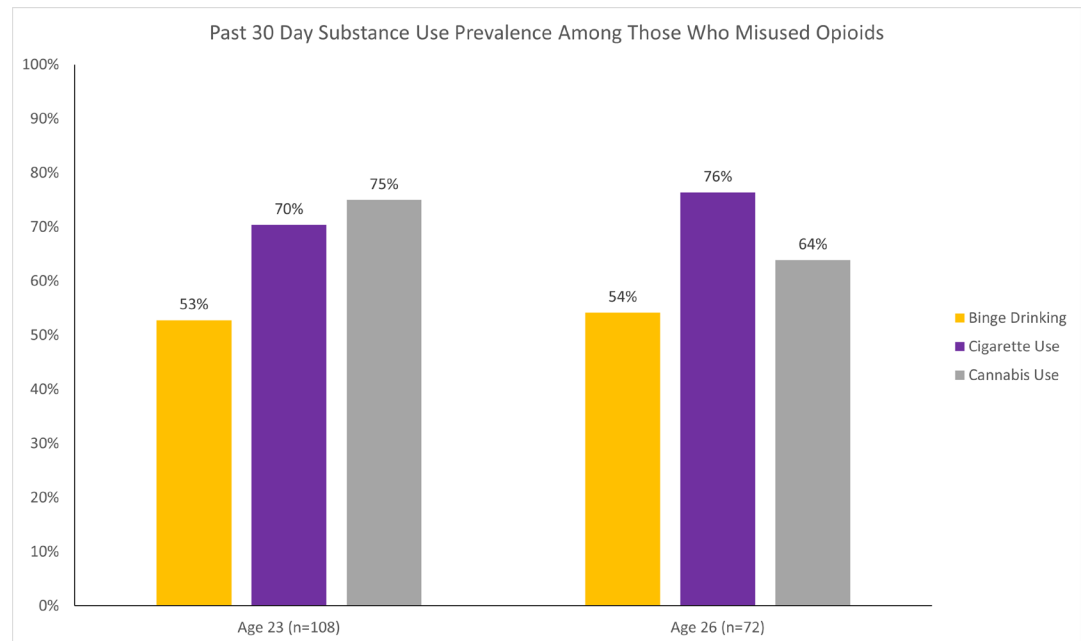
Study data came from 4,407 participants in the [Community Youth Development Study](#) or CYDS. CYDS is a longitudinal, randomized trial testing [Communities That Care](#), a coalition-driven prevention planning and implementation system in 24 rural communities. Participant surveys assessing risk factors, protective factors, and behavioral health outcomes were collected from Grades 5 through 12, and about every other year from age 19 to 28. For the current study, researchers used data collected in 2016 when participants were, on average, 23 years old, and in 2019, when participants were 26 years old.

Substance use was measured using participants' reports of their past-month opioid misuse, heavy drinking, and cigarette and cannabis use. For each of the four substances, the measured risk factors included perceptions of harm, approval of use, and use of each substance by friends and romantic partners. Researchers used statistical analyses to test how much opioid misuse overlapped with using other substances, and how much risk for opioid misuse overlaps with the risk for using other substances.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Misuse of opioids along with other substances was actually quite common. Nearly three quarters of participants who reported misusing opioids also reported using another substance in the past month at both age 23 and age 26. Not surprisingly, then, young adult opioid misuse was mostly explained by a general tendency towards substance use, rather than a specific tendency towards opioid use.

Statistical tests suggested that romantic partner and peer misuse of opioids may pose unique risks for young adult opioid misuse. However, there also was a strong relation between overall risk for use of any substance and opioid misuse.



This graph shows the prevalence of substance misuse in the past 30 days among study participants who reported opioid misuse at age 23 and age 26.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Results suggest that opioid misuse is not a unique phenomenon requiring new strategies for prevention. Expanded funding of existing tested and effective substance use programs may be an efficient and effective strategy for combatting the opioid crisis in young adult populations. [Blueprints for Health Youth Development](#) is one registry of evidence-based interventions that lists tested, effective prevention interventions aimed at promoting healthy youth development and preventing youth problem behavior and substance use.

### FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC, PLEASE REFER TO THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE:

Pandika, D., Bailey, J. A., Oesterle, S., & Kuklinski, M. R. (2022). Young adult opioid misuse indicates a general tendency toward substance use and is strongly predicted by general substance use risk. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 235, 109442.

### FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was supported by National Institute on Drug Abuse grants R01DA015183, R56DA044522, and R01DA044522.