

Sharing and selling of prescription medications in a college student sample

MAJOR FINDINGS:

The researchers interviewed 483 college students who had been prescribed a medication and found that 35.8% had diverted a medication at least once in their lifetime, meaning they sold or shared it with someone else. Analgesics were the most widely prescribed (22.0%), and therefore were responsible for the greatest number of diversions ($n = 101$). On the other hand, ADHD medications were prescribed to a relatively small proportion of students (5.3%) and therefore resulted in half as many diversions ($n = 50$), but had the highest likelihood of being diverted (61.7%). Only nine students shared on a regular basis and 3 regularly sold their prescription. Most diverters only diverted their medication once or twice in their lifetime.

Table 1. Prescription and diversion rates for the top three most prescribed medications, among 483 college students prescribed a medication (Complete Table available in full paper)

Medication	Number of individuals with a prescription for this medication ^a	Weighted percent of individuals in the class population prescribed this medication ($N=2,893$)	Number (%) of individuals who diverted this medication ^b
ADHD Medication	81	5.3% _{wt}	50 (61.7)
Analgesic Medication	288	22.0% _{wt}	101 (35.1)
Other Psychotropic Medication	145	10.2% _{wt}	20 (13.8)
Asthma/Allergy Medication	110	8.2% _{wt}	14 (12.7)
Other Non-Psychotropic Medication	108	5.7% _{wt}	6 (5.6)
Total	483	36.2% _{wt}	173 (35.8)

^a Categories do not sum to the total because some individuals were prescribed multiple medications.

^b Diversions were measured as prescription medications either shared or sold. If a medication was diverted through both sharing and selling, it was only counted once.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Practice and Policy Suggestions: “The issue of diversion is significant for practicing psychiatrists, especially those who deal with young adult populations.” The researchers identified three different types of students who are at high risk for diversion: Students prescribed an ADHD medicine, students with a history of conduct problems in childhood, and nonmedical users of prescription drugs. Students that fall into one of these categories may have regular contact with a medical professional, giving physicians a unique opportunity to help reduce diversion behavior in college students by talking with their patients about the risks and illegality of diversion.

“When students enter college it is important that clinicians remind their patients, especially those with ADHD whose medications will be in high demand, about the need to take their medications as directed, dispose of unused pills, and caution against diversion.” Physicians should also ask their patients how much of their medication they use and adjust the prescription if they have many leftover pills. Additionally, prescribing medications that have a lower likelihood of abuse and diversion such as extended-release formulations and non-stimulant agents could help in lowering the risk of diversion.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Garnier, L.M., Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., O’Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D. (2010). Sharing and selling of prescription medications in a college student sample. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. 71(3), 262-269.



About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.¹ Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin, University of Maryland School of Journalism and disseminated by the Treatment Research Institute (TRI), a non-profit research and development group specializing in science-driven transformation of treatment and policy in substance use/abuse. Click [here](#) to learn more about TRI.

