

Drug involvement during and after college: Estimates of opportunity and use given opportunity

MAJOR FINDINGS:

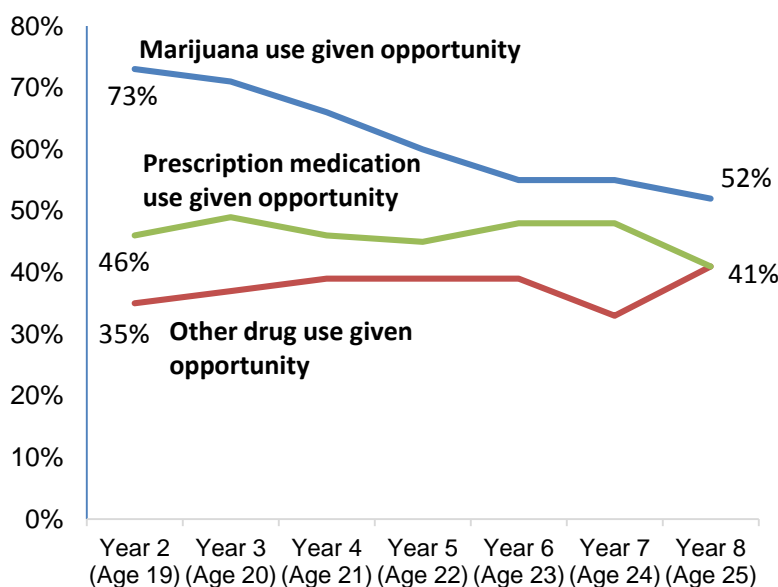
College students commonly perceive that drugs are widely available on campus, but few research studies have quantified the opportunities that college students' have to use drugs or prescription medications nonmedically.^{1,2} This study measures trends in opportunity, use, and use given opportunity of eight drugs and three prescription medications for nonmedical use among college students/young adults during a seven year period. Use given opportunity in this study refers to using a particular drug that was offered by another person.

Data were drawn from a longitudinal prospective study of 1,253 young adults who were assessed during their first year of college (Year 1) and then annually for the next seven years. Binary variables were created for opportunity (i.e., direct offers to use the drug), use, and use given the opportunity to use each drug (marijuana, inhalants, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, amphetamines/methamphetamine) and three classes of prescription medications for nonmedical use (stimulants, analgesics, and tranquilizers).

Not surprisingly, marijuana was the drug most likely to be offered to participants, but opportunity to use marijuana significantly decreased from Year 2 (71%) to Year 8 (48%). Opportunity to use prescription medications nonmedically and drugs other than marijuana followed similar declining trajectories, with participants reporting the highest opportunity in Years 2 and 3 for the majority of drugs. The majority of participants had their first opportunity to use marijuana around age 16 and between ages 18 and 21 for all other drugs.

Use of all drugs peaked when participants were still enrolled in college with the exception of ecstasy. As shown in the figure below, marijuana use given opportunity was consistently highest over time, followed by prescription medications used nonmedically.

In contrast to marijuana, where use given opportunity declined through Year 8, use given opportunity of most other drugs remained stable over time, even during the post-college period.



Of major interest to:

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



Practice and Policy Suggestions:

Opportunity to use drugs and prescription medications nonmedically was highest when participants were still enrolled in college, confirming the high-risk nature of the college environment. Colleges and universities should implement both environmental and individual-level strategies to reduce college student drug use and mitigate potential harms. While college is an opportune time to screen for and address drug use, findings also reveal a need for drug use prevention strategies after college, perhaps in primary care offices and the workplace. Future studies should also focus on better understanding the differences between individuals who use a drug given the opportunity from those who do not.

References:

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The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Allen, H.K., Caldeira, K.M., Bugbee, B.A., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Arria, A.M. (2017). Drug involvement during and after college: Estimates of opportunity and use given opportunity. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 174, 150-157. doi:10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2017.01.025



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.^{1,2} 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 School of Public Health at aarria@umd.edu.

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