

Commentary

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Drug Use in the United States Military is on the Rise; Prescription Drug Abuse is at the Center of a Growing Drug Problem

The United States was hit by the modern drug epidemic beginning in the late 1960s. The epidemic peaked in 1979 when 14% of Americans 12 and older reported having used an illegal drug in the previous month, meaning that they were current users of illegal drugs.ⁱ Since that time, rates of drug use dipped to a low of 6.7% in 1992. The most recent national survey reported a current use rate of 8%.ⁱⁱ

Members of the U.S. military were not excluded from the drug epidemic. In 1980, 27.6% of all active duty personnel were current illegal drug users.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1982 the U.S. Navy began randomly drug testing its active duty personnel following a tragic drug use-related accident on the carrier Nimitz. Shortly thereafter, drug testing was extended to all active duty U.S. military personnel. The results were dramatic. Rates of self-reported illicit drug use plummeted between 1980 and 1988 and then slowly continued to decrease to a low of 2.7% in 1998.^{iv} The military's use of drug testing was the template in the late 1980s for the introduction of drug testing into the workplace. Historically, U.S. military personnel were randomly drug tested at far higher rates than most civilians that were subjected to workplace drug testing. The success of the military drug testing program has served as a benchmark for all drug prevention efforts.

For this reason the most recent military data reporting the rapid increase of nonmedical use of prescription drugs have set off alarm bells. In its latest issue of the *ONDCP Update*, the Office of National Drug Control Policy highlights new data released from the *Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel*. These new data show that the current rate of illegal drug use in the military has increased to nearly 12% in 2008.^v However, the use of purely illegal drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin among military personnel has not changed. The increase in the overall drug use rate is due to a significant increase in the nonmedical use of prescription drugs, with 11% of active-duty military personnel self-reporting past month use. This percentage has tripled in just three years since the last survey conducted in 2005.

These new drug use data confirm abundant evidence from national drug use indicators that the nonmedical use of prescription drugs is growing rapidly. In 2008 more Americans used prescription drugs nonmedically for the first time (2.5 million) than the number of first-time marijuana users (2.2 million).^{vi}

Prescription drug abuse began to escalate dramatically in the last decade of the 20th century. One of the primary priorities of U.S. drug policy in the 21st century is to reduce non-medical use of prescribed controlled substances. These new military data signal the urgency of this objective.

Visit the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. website www.ibhinc.org for more information on prescription drug abuse, including the development of abuse-resistant formulations of prescribed controlled substances.

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ⁱ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1999). *1997 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse*. (Office of Applied Studies). Rockville, MD. Retrieved March 1, 2010 from <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/NHSDA/1997Main/toc.htm>

ⁱⁱ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, MD.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bray, R.M., Sanchez, R.P., Ornstein, M.L., Lentile, D., Vincus, A.A., Baird, T.U., et al. (1999). *1998 Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Military Personnel*. Research Triangle Institute. Report No. RTI/7034/006-FR.

^{iv} Bray, R.M., Sanchez, R.P., Ornstein, M.L., Lentile, D., Vincus, A.A., Baird, T.U., et al. (1999). *1998 Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Military Personnel*. Research Triangle Institute. Report No. RTI/7034/006-FR.

^v Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2010, Feb). Study shows increased misuse of prescription drugs in military. ONDCP Update, 1(2).

^{vi} Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, MD.

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) focuses on national drug abuse policies that emphasize prevention and investment in better treatment approaches. Established in 1978, IBH is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization working to reduce substance abuse through the power of good ideas. IBH's websites include www.ibhinc.org, www.StopDruggedDriving.org, and www.PreventionNotPunishment.org.