

# Understanding War on Drugs Statistics

## 4. Outcome Obfuscation

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### Outcome Obfuscation

A sort of statistical sleight of hand, *Outcome Obfuscation* is a misleading confusion of outcome and index event. For example, in a 2003 DEA press release entitled the "The Myth of the 'Chilling Effect'" the index event is the rate of actions against physicians, which they incorrectly calculate. The outcome would be some measure of effect on physician behavior resulting from the index prosecutions, which the DEA ignores.

*Outcome Obfuscation* commonly turns up in statements like the following, in which drug use is correctly identified as an index event, but is also incorrectly identified as the (problem) outcome.

- "In 2001 it is estimated that 94 million people had used an illegal drug at some point in their lives. Today, some 16 million people are using illicit drugs at least once a month -- about seven percent of the population."
- "The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse reports a significant increase in "past month, non-medical use" of pain relievers among those age 18-25 when comparing 2001 data with that for 2000."

The misleading message is: use = abuse = problem = national crisis demanding federal action. More accurately and honestly we might say, for example, that a teenage alcohol use rate of X (index event) resulted in Y motor vehicle accidents (outcome).

I hope you found this document helpful. The "[Understanding Drug War Statistics](#)" series continues with Part 5: "[Denominator Abuse](#)"