Are Girls More Vulnerable to Substance Abuse than Boys?
The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) Cries Wolf Again

Maia Szalavitz; STATS news; 2005-07-16
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See also:
[WAR ON PAIN SUFFERERS #1: "Montana 2005 - a War on Sick People"]
“CASA Report Uses Suspect Science to Hype Teen Marijuana Menace” - Drug War Chronicles #335, 2004-04-30

The Center for the Abuse of Statistical Analysis is at it again.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy (or “ONDCP” better known as the "drug czar's" office) does not usually critique statistics released by sympathetic organizations related to drugs.

But in a Time Magazine story ["Why is the DEA Hounding This Doctor?" Time; July 18, 2005] focused on the damage done to patients by the spate of prosecutions of doctors for "overprescribing" pain medications, an unnamed ONDCP official cautioned Time's reporter not to take certain figures at face value.

The latest "study" released by the National Center on Substance Abuse and Addiction at Columbia University (better known to STATS readers as the Center for the Abuse of Statistical Analysis - see here and here) claims that prescription drug abuse rose 212% among youths aged 12-17 and 81% among people over 18 between 1992-2003.

However, as ONDCP pointed out to Time, changes in the way the survey was done over that time allow no such conclusion to be drawn.

CASA -- and the media that covered its "research" -- also made much of a statistic claiming that there are some 15.1 million people who currently abuse prescription drugs, saying that this is the second largest group of drug users in the country, with only marijuana, tobacco and alcohol being used more commonly. The problem is that the category "prescription drug abuse" includes people who have taken Ritalin once to cram for a test; people who have "partied" with their parents' leftover opioids after surgery then never used such drugs again; chronic Valium abusers, who take their drug with alcohol; people who rob drug stores and inject dilaudid, people who snort Oxycontin -- all in all, many types of users of dozens of types of drugs.

If you want to know about people who have problems related to misuse of prescription drugs (or use of prescription drugs without a legitimate prescription), you'll want to look at the data CASA didn't hype when it mined the National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health for scary statistics.
How many people suffer substance abuse or dependence (the two categories of drug problems defined by the American Psychiatric Association, dependence being the more serious and more likely to require treatment) related to prescription drugs? In 2003, it was 1,923,000. Only 361,000 of these were under 18 -- and only 281,000 under-18's were abusing or dependent on opioids.

Any opioid addiction or abuse amongst youth is worrisome, of course. But that number represents just 25% of the number of youth afflicted with alcohol abuse or dependence... 1,471,000 as of 2003.

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