

Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs): A Public Health System Effort to Address Prescription Drug Abuse

In just the last few years, prescription drug overdoses have become one of the leading public health challenges in the United States, drawing the attention of President Obama, former President Clinton, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) among many others. Prescription opioid pain medications provide needed relief to millions of Americans, yet the country now faces epidemic rates of their diversion and misuse. Policy solutions are urgently needed to address this entrenched public health challenge.

There are many stakeholders seeking to address the public health challenge posed by prescription drug misuse. They include health insurers, prescribers, pharmacies, patients, pharmaceutical companies, and governmental agencies (e.g., health departments, law enforcement, and substance abuse treatment agencies).

Recent headlines indicate the extent of the problem:

- Obama steps up U.S. effort to fight abuse of heroin and painkillers. *New York Times*, March 29, 2016
- CDC warns doctors about the dangers of prescribing opioid painkillers. *Washington Post*, March 15, 2016
- Prescription drug abuse growing among nation's young. *NBC Nightly News*, March 27, 2016
- Federal officials, advocates push pill-tracking databases. *Baltimore Sun*, March 28, 2016

Prescription drug misuse as a public health problem

For decades, motor vehicle crashes had been the leading cause of injury-related death in the U.S., but beginning in 2008, poisonings (most of which are from drugs including opioids) overtook motor vehicle crashes and are now well ahead as the country's leading cause of death by injury.¹

Prescription opioids (a class including drugs such as oxycodone and hydrocodone) are particularly prone to misuse, and have been associated with substantial morbidity and mortality.² Deaths due to prescription opioids currently outnumber those from cocaine and heroin combined.³ In addition, for each opioid-related death, there are many more individuals struggling with misuse who are seen in drug treatment facilities.⁴

PDMPs: a widely used policy mechanism

Among the many federal and state initiatives designed to tackle the diversion and misuse of prescription opioids, Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs) have emerged as one of the most widely adopted policy mechanisms to address the growing epidemic. Forty-nine states have operational PDMPs (Missouri is the lone hold-out).⁵ PDMPs collect, analyze, and report information about the prescribing and utilization of controlled substances, with the primary goal of reducing prescription drug diversion and misuse.⁶

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- ⁸ Prescription Drug Monitoring Program Training and Technical Assistance Center. *Prescription Drug Monitoring Program Administrators Guide for Training Law Enforcement*. 2013.
- ⁹ Rutkow L, Chang HY, Daubresse M, et al. Effect of Florida's Prescription Drug Monitoring Program and pill mill laws on opioid prescribing and use. *JAMA Intern Med*. 2015;175(10):1642-1649.
- ¹⁰ Maxwell JC. The prescription drug epidemic in the United States: a perfect storm. *Drug Alcohol Rev*. 2011;30(3):264-270.