

# Prescription Drug Misuse in Utah

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Utah  
Prevention  
Network



Utah Department of  
Health & Human  
Services

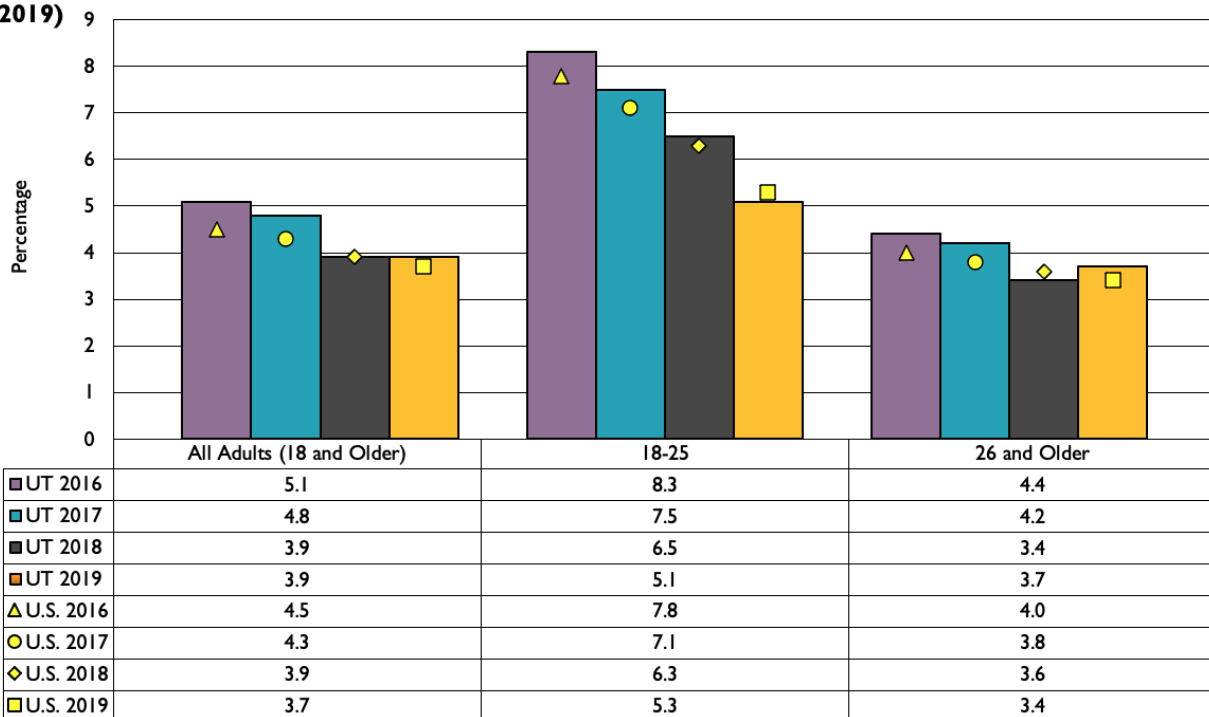
Historically, Utah has experienced some of the lowest rates of substance misuse in the nation. However, the rates of prescription drug misuse in Utah have rivaled, and sometimes, exceeded the national average over the past two decades. Additionally, the rate of drug poisoning overdose deaths observed between 2000 and 2014 increased dramatically, and a large proportion of these deaths were associated with prescription opioids. In response, public health and prevention professionals across Utah have implemented a variety of strategies and interventions to combat the opioid epidemic in our state. Data suggests that these efforts are working, as rates of both prescription drug misuse and prescription drug related deaths have declined.

## Prescription drug misuse data

Data on prescription drug misuse are available through the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) and the Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention Survey (SHARP). Unfortunately, the availability of data on adult prescription drug misuse is limited. The NSDUH provides data on the number of adults who misuse prescription pain relievers during the past year<sup>1</sup>, but this is the only indicator that is consistently available at the state level.

**Figure 1** compares adult prescription pain reliever misuse rates from 2016 through 2019 for Utah and the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. Percentage of Adults Indicating Misuse of Prescription Pain Relievers in the Past Year, Utah vs. U.S. (2016-2019)**



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

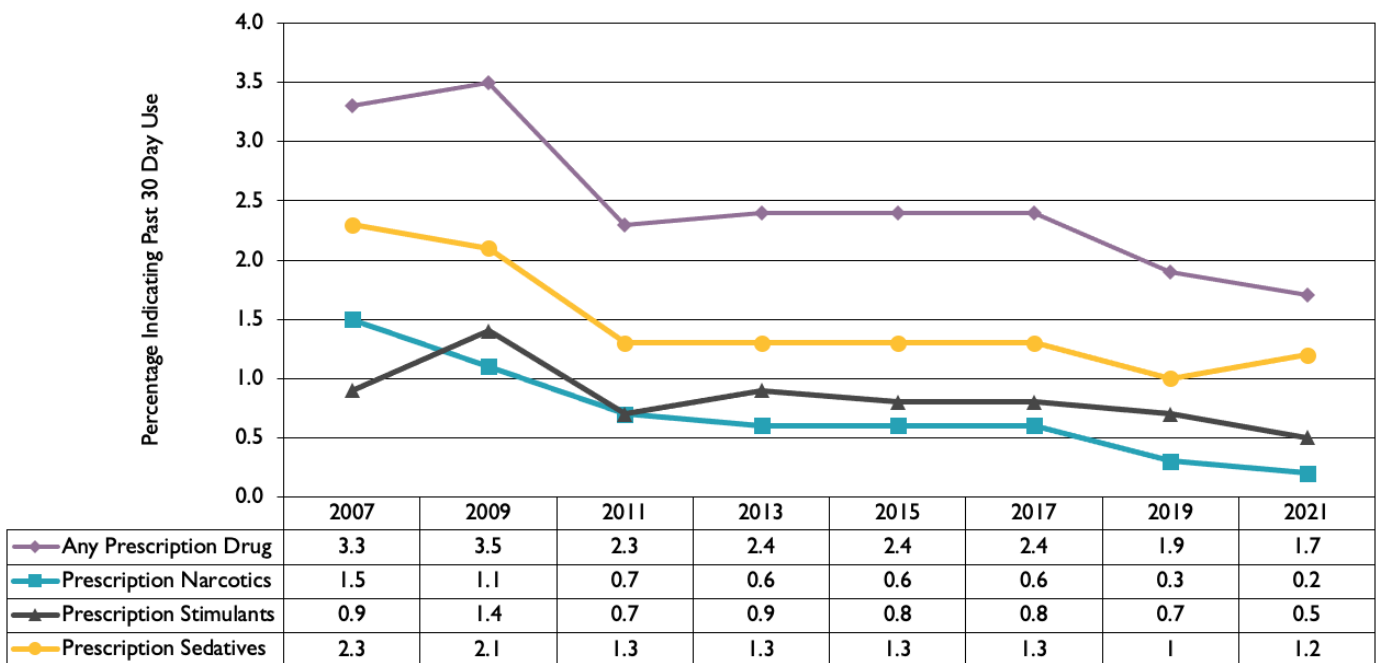
<sup>1</sup>Prescription pain reliever translates most closely to prescription opioids. Misuse is defined as use in any way not directed by a doctor (use without a prescription or use of greater amounts, more frequently, or for a longer duration than directed by a doctor).

<sup>2</sup>Data for this item are not available prior to 2016 due to a change in the wording of this item. Additionally, 2020 NSDUH data are not available due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on administration of the NSDUH.

Overall, rates of adult pain reliever misuse in Utah are similar to national rates, with the rates in Utah occasionally higher in some years and among some age groups. In terms of trends, there was a welcome decline in misuse rates from 2016 to 2019 in Utah. In particular, the decrease for the young adult age group (aged 18-25) was quite large. This is encouraging given that young adults have historically had a much higher rate of misuse than older adults (aged 26 and older). There was a small increase in the rate for the older adult group from 2018 to 2019, but it was not statistically significant.

The SHARP survey provides several prescription misuse indicators for Utah youth (in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12), including rates of non-medical<sup>3</sup> use of narcotics (opioids), stimulants, sedatives, and tranquilizers. Overall, SHARP survey data paint a relatively positive picture regarding non-medical prescription drug use among Utah youth (**Figure 2**). Past 30 day non-medical use of prescription drugs has not been widespread among Utah youth. Since 2007, the rate of any non-medical prescription drug use has not exceeded 3.5%, and has remained below 2.5% since 2011. Additionally, non-medical prescription drug use among Utah youth has been consistently trending down over time. Comparisons of use rates among Utah 12th graders to a national sample from the Monitoring the Future survey also provide favorable conclusions, with use rates among Utah youth consistently lower than their national counterparts (**Figure 3**).

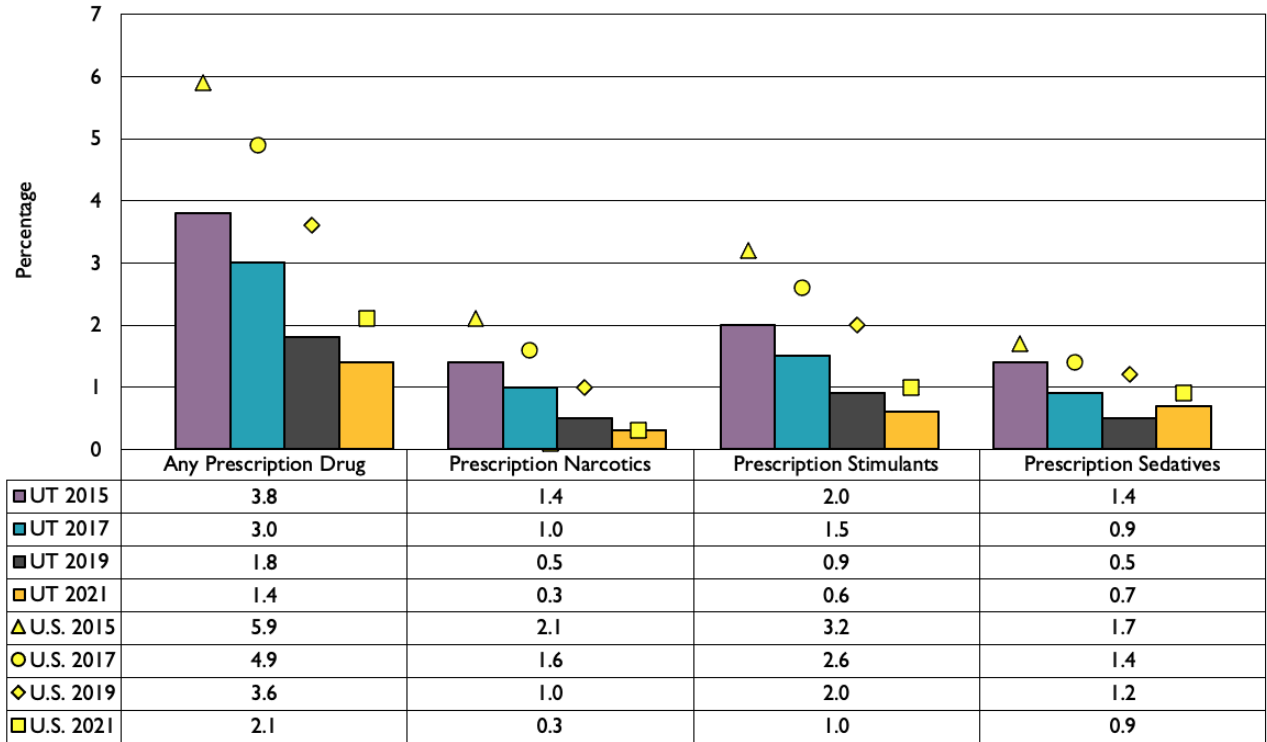
**Figure 2. Youth Past 30 Day Non-medical Prescription Drug Use Trends, Grades 6, 8, 10 & 12 Combined**



Sources: Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention Survey (SHARP)

<sup>3</sup>Non-medical refers to the use of prescription drugs “without a doctor telling you to take them.”

**Figure 3. Percentage of 12th Grade Youth Indicating Non-medical Prescription Drug use in the Past 30 Days,**

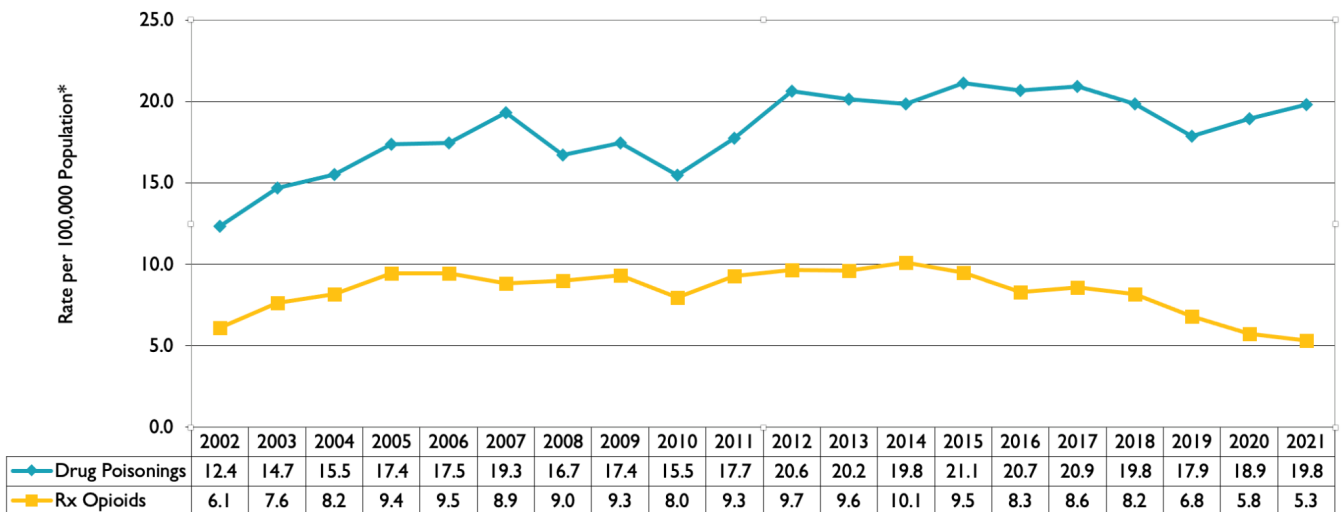


Sources: Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) & Monitoring the Future (MTF) surveys

### Prescription drug use consequences

The misuse of prescription drugs can lead to a variety of negative consequences including drug dependence, injury, and death from overdose. Over the last 20 years, Utah has consistently had a higher rate of drug poisoning deaths than the nation, and a high proportion of these deaths have been associated with opioids.

**Figure 4. Rate of Drug Poisoning Deaths and Prescription Opioid Deaths in Utah per 100,000 Population (2002-2021)**



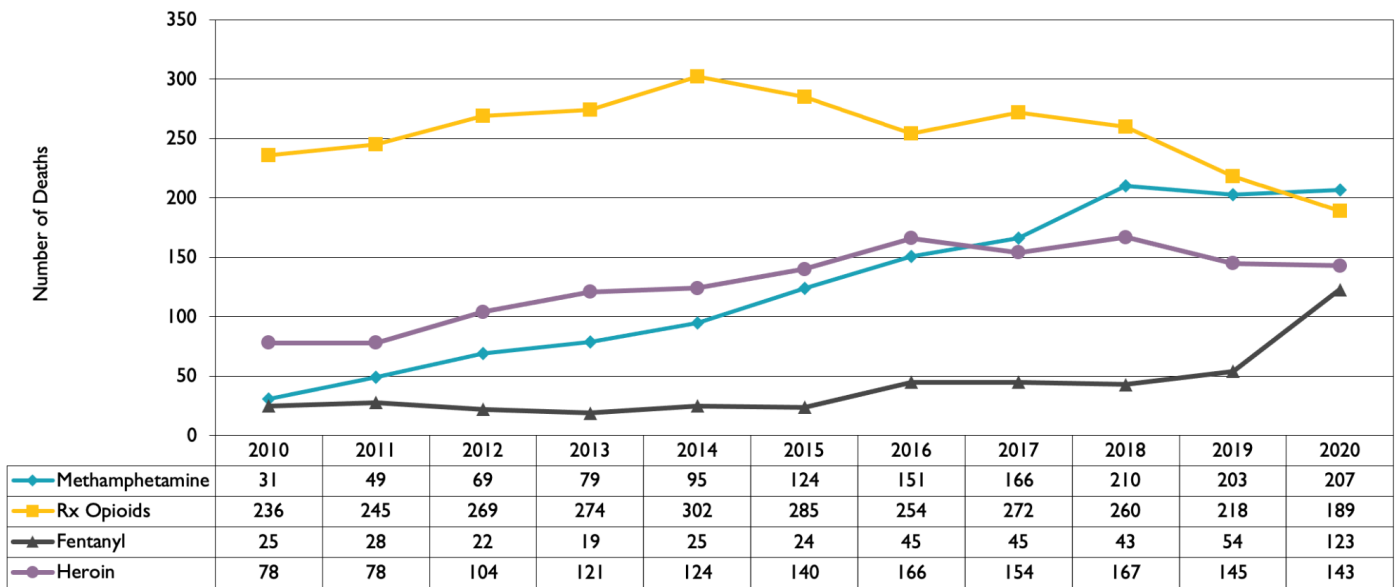
\*Crude rates presented (data necessary for calculating age-adjusted rates was not available).

Sources: Prescription opioid deaths - Office of the Medical Examiner Data  
 Drug poisoning deaths - Utah Department of Health, Indicator Based Information System  
 (ICD 10 Codes: x40-x44, x85, x60-x64, y10-y14)

Addressing the opioid epidemic has been a priority for the prevention and public health systems. A variety of interventions have been implemented over the past two decades, including the development of a prescription drug monitoring program, prescriber education, education about and resources for proper disposal of prescription drugs, and media campaigns. **Figure 4** presents the rates of drug poisoning deaths and opioid related overdose deaths in Utah from 2002 to 2021. The rate of prescription opioid related deaths increased rapidly through 2005, and remained elevated for approximately a decade. However, the data show a steady decline in prescription opioid deaths over the past several years (with rates even falling below 2002 rates in 2020), suggesting that the interventions and prevention strategies implemented in Utah are working.

Despite decreasing rates of prescription opioid overdose deaths, there continues to be a troubling upward trend in drug poisoning deaths in Utah. **Figure 5** presents trend data for drugs commonly associated with overdose deaths between 2010 and 2020<sup>4</sup>. As overdose deaths associated with prescription opioids have decreased, overdose deaths associated with heroin, methamphetamine, and fentanyl<sup>5</sup> have increased. Changes in substance misuse and consequence trends highlight the importance for prevention and public health professionals to address both current substance misuse trends, as well as focus on upstream prevention efforts that reduce risk factors and build protective factors in our communities.

**Figure 5. Number of Drug Poisoning Deaths in Utah by Drug Type (2010-2020)**



Source: Office of the Medical Examiner Data via Utah Drug Monitoring Initiative Annual Report 2020/2021.

*This data brief was prepared for the Utah State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup by Bach Harrison, LLC. To learn more about prevention efforts to reduce substance abuse and misuse, visit <https://utahprevention.org/>.*

<sup>4</sup>Deaths by drug type are not mutually exclusive as overdose deaths are often associated with more than one type of drug.

<sup>5</sup> Most fentanyl involved in overdose deaths is illicitly manufactured, and often added to other drugs or sold as counterfeit drugs..