

Opioid Use among Missouri College Students

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 28 public and private colleges and universities in the state working to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. This brief includes data for the 23 4-year institutions in the coalition; 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey, and their data is not included in this statewide aggregate. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/ nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health have on student health and wellness. This brief will focus on data related to opioid usage in college students from the 2025 Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (sample size, N = 5,634).

Scope of the Problem

While opioid misuse use and related overdose deaths have diminished over the years it is still a problem that needs to be addressed on campus. In 2024, there were 1,450 overdose deaths in Missouri (down slightly from 1,948 deaths in 2023), and it has been on a downward trend since 2022.

Charts 1 and 2 show that Missouri college students report a slight decline in misuse of their own

Chart 1: Past Year Prescription Drug Misuse

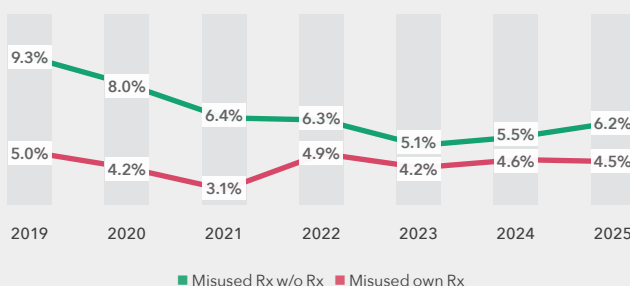
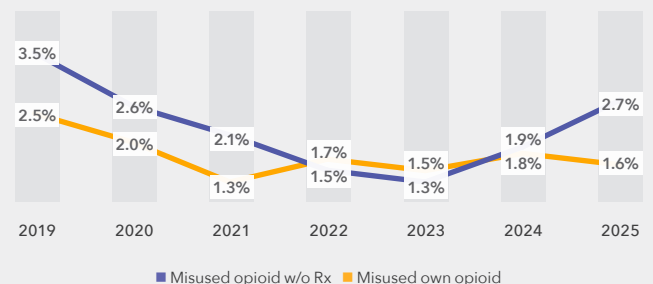


Chart 2: Past Year Prescription Opioid Misuse

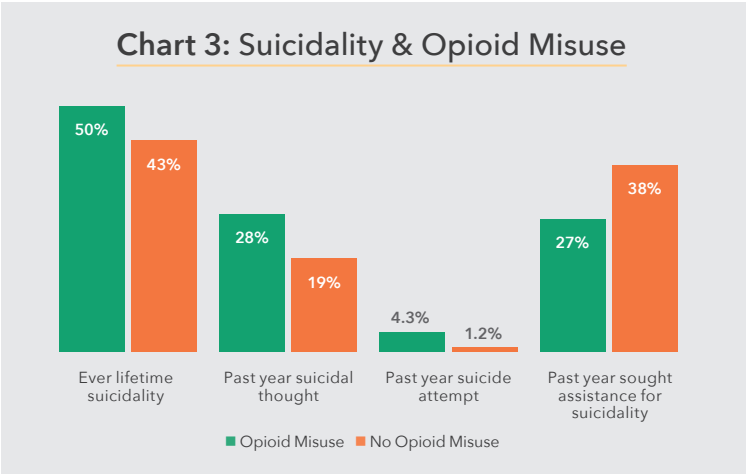


prescription drugs in the past year in 2025 (e.g., taking more often or higher dose other than prescribed), but rates of students misusing prescription drugs without a prescription have stayed steady and misusing opioids not prescribed to them have been on the incline.

Opioid Use & Suicidality

National data shows a strong and consistent association between prescription opioid misuse and suicidality

among college students¹. Prescription opioid misuse is linked both to the development of depression and to attempts to cope with existing depressive symptoms. College students experience higher levels of psychological distress than many other populations.



Missouri data also shows that students who report opioid misuse—either with or without a prescription—also report higher rates of both lifetime and past-year suicidality. Of additional concern, these students are less likely to seek help for suicidality. As shown in Table 1, students who misuse opioids are less likely to seek support from friends or family and are more likely to rely on emergency or crisis services when seeking assistance. This highlights the importance identifying students who are misusing opioids or experiencing suicidality and connecting them to treatment.

Table 1: Help Seeking for Suicidality by Opioid Misuse

	Opioid Misuse	No Opioid Misuse
Campus Counseling Center	22%	27%
Friends/Family	44%	51%
Emergency/Crisis Services	22%	13%
Off Campus Mental Health Center	22%	48%
Off Campus Medical Doctor	17%	30%

Missouri college students who misuse opioids are also more likely to report not knowing about available

resources as a barrier to seeking help for suicidality (13% vs. 8.1%). Expanding the visibility of resources across campus settings and increasing awareness of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline may help reduce barriers to accessing care and support earlier intervention.

Demographics of Students Who Misuse Opioids

Examining the intersecting identities of students who misuse opioids can help identify opportunities for targeted education, outreach, and prevention. Missouri data indicate that students who report opioid misuse are most likely to identify as women (53%), first-year students (32%), full-time students (95%), and under the age of 21 (58%), with relatively even representation among students living on and off campus. These findings suggest multiple touchpoints—particularly during the first year of college—where prevention messaging and resource sharing may be most effective.

Table 2: Demographics & Opioid Misuse

	Opioid Misuse	No Opioid Misuse
First Generation Student	36%	28%
International Student	16%	11%
Student Parent	6.9%	3.3%
Student with a Disability	4.3%	1.2%

As shown in Table 2, students who misuse opioids are more likely to identify as first-generation students, international students, student parents, and students with disabilities compared to those who do not report opioid misuse. These overlapping identities may increase vulnerability to both substance misuse and barriers to accessing support services.

Notably, students who reported past-year opioid misuse were less likely to support their campus

providing overdose-related resources (84% vs. 91%) and were less likely to be aware of Missouri's Good Samaritan Law (59% vs. 69%). This gap in support and awareness highlights a critical opportunity for improved education and engagement.

Conclusion

Despite recent declines in opioid misuse and overdose deaths in Missouri, opioid misuse remains a significant concern on college campuses, where affected students experience higher levels of suicidality and are less likely to seek preventive or informal support, often relying on emergency services instead. Gaps in resource awareness, lower support for overdose-related programming, and limited knowledge of the Good Samaritan Law further increase risks, particularly among students with intersecting identities such as first-year students, women, first-generation and international students, student parents, and students with disabilities. These findings emphasize the need for early, visible, and integrated campus strategies that combine opioid misuse prevention, mental health support, and suicide prevention through proactive education, normalized help-seeking, and accessible resources.

Resources

Missouri campuses have access to evidence-informed tools and supports to address opioid misuse and related harms:

MoSafeRx offers free training, education, and technical assistance to help campuses reduce prescription

drug misuse, increase safe prescribing and disposal practices, and strengthen prevention efforts. These trainings can be incorporated into faculty, staff, and student education initiatives.

Our Naloxone (Narcan) toolkit provides campuses with best-practice guidance for overdose response, including policy templates, implementation strategies, and ready-made educational materials. Making naloxone widely available and pairing distribution with training can increase confidence in overdose response and save lives.

Ready-made prevention and awareness materials, including signage, digital content, and outreach resources, can support consistent messaging across campus environments. Integrating information about naloxone access, the Good Samaritan Law, and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline into existing health and safety communications helps reduce stigma and increase resource awareness.

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References:

1. Davis, R. E., Doyle, N. A., & Nahar, V. K. (2020). Association between prescription opioid misuse and dimensions of suicidality among college students. *Psychiatry Research*, 287, 112469. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2019.07.002>

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