

# **The American Opioid Epidemic in Special Populations: Five Examples**

The United States is in the midst of an unprecedented crisis of prescription and illicit opioid misuse, use disorder, and overdose. Although the crisis has affected large swaths of the U.S. population, it has impacted certain segments of the population with an extra level of intensity—justice-involved populations, rural populations, veterans, adolescents and young adults, and people who inject drugs. Research has clearly shown that solutions for the opioid overdose epidemic are not one size fits all, and special attention should be paid to these populations that may be suffering unduly.

The discussion paper “The American Opioid Epidemic in Special Populations: Five Examples” focuses on these five identified populations and, for each, reviews why the population is an important area of focus, current barriers encountered in accessing care, promising approaches in supporting this population, and high-impact research and action priorities.

## **The Importance of Adolescents and Young Adults**

Adolescents and young adults (ages 12-24) have developing brains that make them more vulnerable to the effects of substance use and an increased risk of developing substance use disorders (SUDs) more quickly than older individuals. Adolescents and young adults are, generally, more likely to try opioids than older populations, and when they do initiate use, are more likely to develop an opioid use disorder (OUD). Adolescents can experience significant barriers to accessing care, and are found to especially underutilize treatment for OUD due primarily to financial barriers as well as a lack of confidence in the approachability and confidentiality of family members and health care providers.

**The 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates  
14% of high school students have engaged in opioid misuse.**

## Promising Approaches for Adolescents and Young Adults

Adolescents and young adults are a population among which early intervention and prevention efforts could result in major changes in terms of development of OUD and its negative impacts. There are a number of ways in which to intervene early, including:

- Treating co-occurring mental health disorders that often present alongside OUD or SUD
- Reducing the risk of initiating substance misuse at an early age through effective and data-driven prevention approaches
- Reducing sources of opioids that adolescents or young adults could divert to inappropriate use
- Addressing the stigma surrounding SUD/OUD and SUD treatment
- Improving appropriate levels of opioid prescribing by health care providers
- Improving financial resources to obtain evidence-based treatment (MOUD) and increasing the availability of MOUD and providers for adolescents

## Research and Action Priorities for Adolescents and Young Adults

- Training pediatric providers to treat and prevent substance use
- Strengthening training for providers in general behavioral health, SUDs, and pharmacotherapies for OUD
- Addressing the cost of treatment, including insurance coverage for mental health and SUDs, for adolescents and young adults
- Developing adolescent and young adult treatment systems that recognize the unique developmental stage, strengths, and challenges of the population
- Promoting research on prevention strategies that incorporate peers, family members, and schools

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