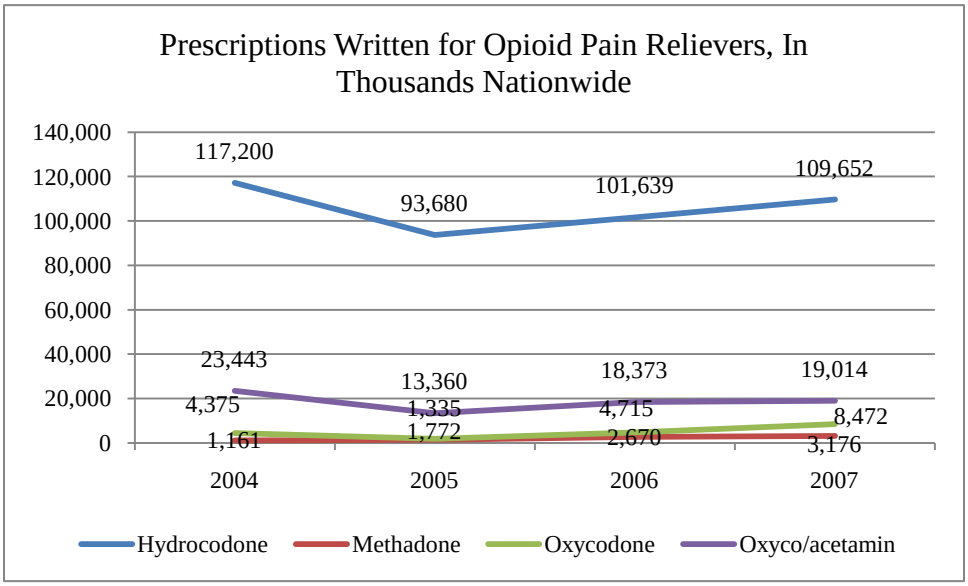
Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Mental Health and Developmental Services
Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Agency (SAPTA)
Prescription Drug Abuse
September 2010

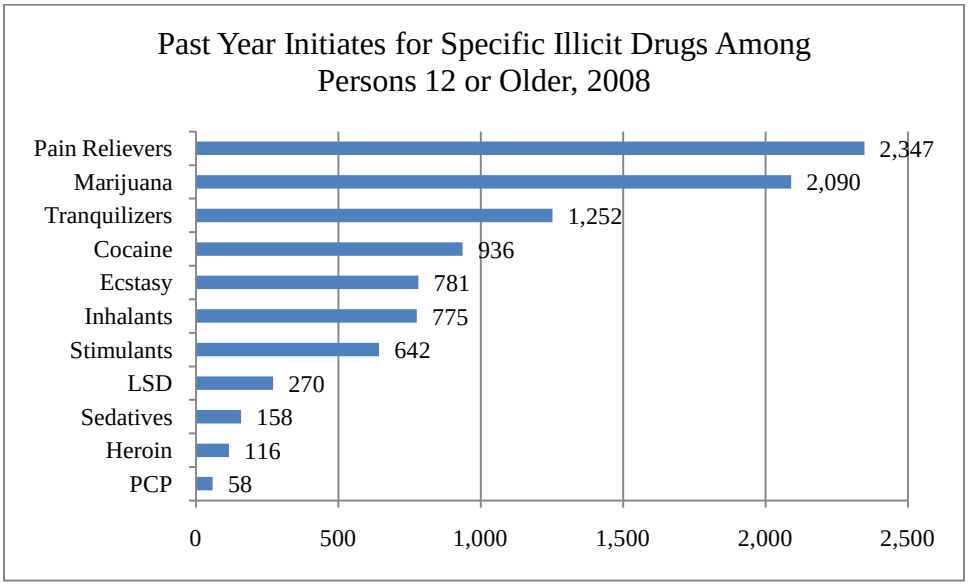
Prescription Drug Abuse

Approximately 6.2 million individuals aged 12 or older were current (past month) nonmedical users of prescription-type psychotherapeutic drugs (opioid pain relievers, tranquilizers, sedatives, or stimulants) during 2008, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health) (NSDUH). Current nonmedical use of these drugs, collectively referred to as "controlled prescription drugs (CPDs)", remained relatively stable from 2003 (6.5 million) to 2007 (6.9 million) and decreased slightly in 2008 to 6.2 million. However, the number of deaths and treatment admissions involving CPDs, particularly prescription opioids, has increased significantly since 2002. (NSDUH) Nevada has ranked in the top quartile of states reporting the highest percentage of those using prescription drugs nonmedically.

Pain relievers are the most widely diverted and abused prescription psychotherapeutics, according to NSDUH. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) believes that most of these pain relievers are controlled prescription opioids. Abusers use opioid pain relievers largely for their euphoric effect. Tranquilizers and sedatives are abused, although to a lesser extent; abusers often use the drugs in combination with opioid pain relievers because they potentiate the effects of the opioid. Opioid pain relievers, tranquilizers, and sedatives are abused primarily by young adults aged 18 to 25; adolescents (12 to 17 years of age) also compose a significant user group for these drugs. (National Drug Intelligence Center, National Prescription Drug Threat Assessment, April 2009).

In a statement by National Institute on Drug Abuse Director Nora D. Volkow, M.D. (before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, July 26, 2006) explained that since the early 1990s, there has been an increase in the extent of prescription drug abuse in this country that is quite likely the result of a confluence of factors, including significant increases in the number of prescriptions written, increases in drug availability, aggressive marketing by the pharmaceutical industry, the proliferation of illegal Internet pharmacies that dispense these medications without proper prescriptions and surveillance, and a great social acceptability for medicating a growing number of conditions. The fact that doctors are prescribing these drugs legitimately and with increasing frequency to treat a variety of ailments leads to the misguided and dangerous conclusion that their nonmedical use should be equally safe. This misperception of safety may contribute, for example, to the casual attitude of many college students toward abusing stimulants to improve cognitive function and academic performance.

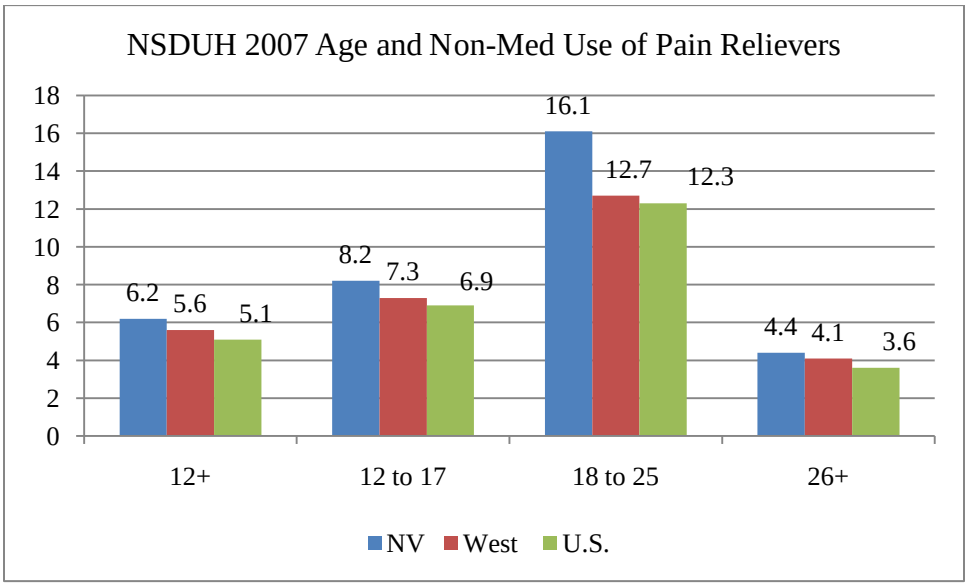




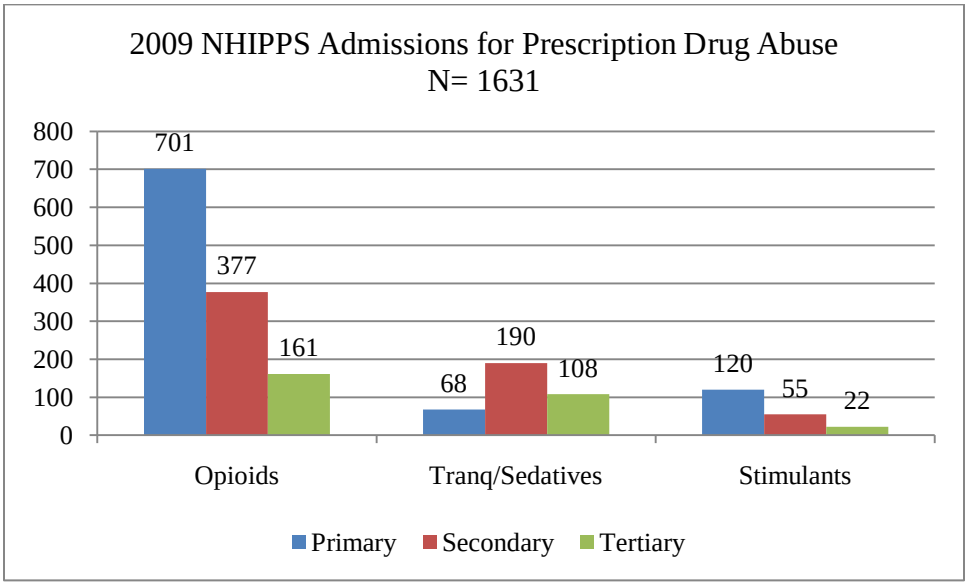
Source: SAMHSA, NSDUH, 2008

In 2008, an estimated 2.9 million people age 12 and older used an illicit drug for the first time in the past 12 months. This category of drugs included powerful narcotics, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone and methadone, codeine, morphine, fentanyl, and dextroamphetamine. 2.3 million people used pain relievers for the first time, 2.1 used marijuana for the first time, 1.2 million started using tranquilizers, and 0.9 million started using cocaine. (NSDUH, 2008).

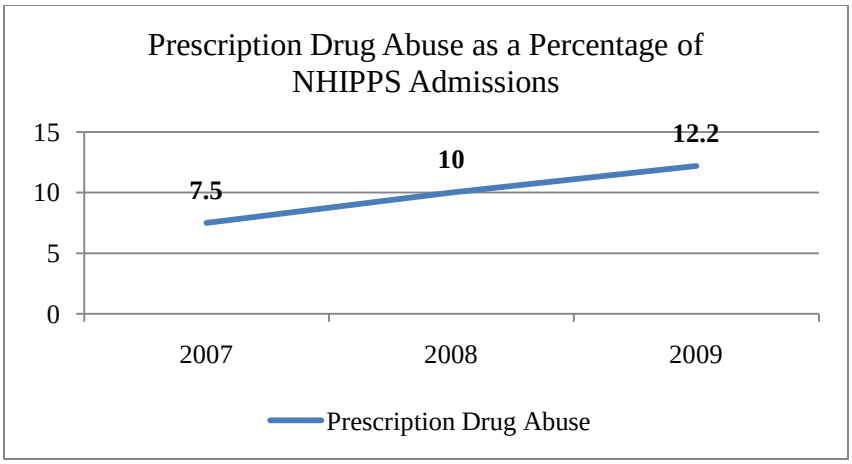
Prescription Drug Abuse in Nevada



The NSDUH done in 2007 showed that people nationwide 18 to 25 used pain relievers non-medically more than those in other age groups.

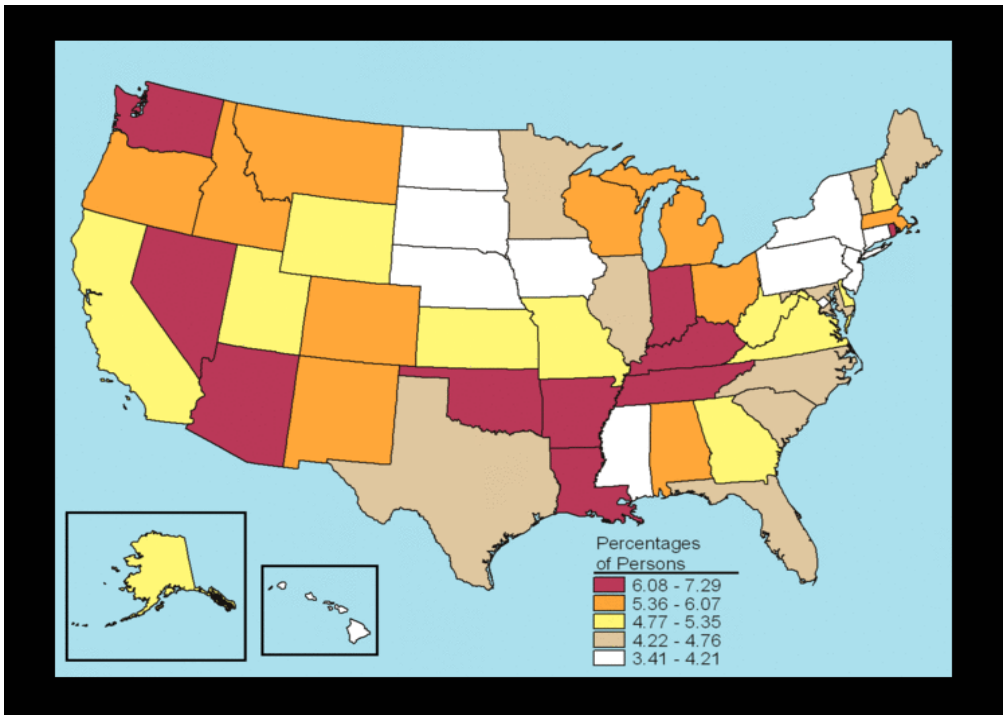


Prescription drugs that are abused are usually separated into three categories: opioid pain relievers, tranquilizers and sedatives and stimulants. Methamphetamine is a stimulant which is generally purchased as a street drug and so is not included in this chart. Opioids included are oxycontin, oxycodone, hydromorphone, morphine, codeine and others. Prescription tranquilizers and sedatives include benzodiazepines, such as Xanax, Valium, and Ativan and barbiturates, such as Seconal, Ambien and Nembutal. Prescription stimulants are also diverted and abused although to a lesser extent and include Adderal and Dexedrine. All of these drugs are often taken together and with alcohol.



NHIPPS is the Nevada Health Information Provider Performance System and it is used to track clients admitted to substance abuse treatment programs funded by the state. (NHIPPS data is reported on the state fiscal year calendar July 1 to June 30) Between 2007 and 2009, treatment admissions for prescription drug abuse increased steadily and now represent about 12 percent of clients admitted for treatment. It is important, in considering treatment data, that only about 1 percent of people who need treatment for substance abuse actually seek and complete a treatment program. So numbers of people seeking treatment do not accurately reflect the numbers of people who need substance abuse treatment.

Nonmedical Use of Pain Relievers in Past Year among Persons Aged 12 or Older, by State: Percentages, Annual Averages Based on 2007 and 2008 NSDUHs

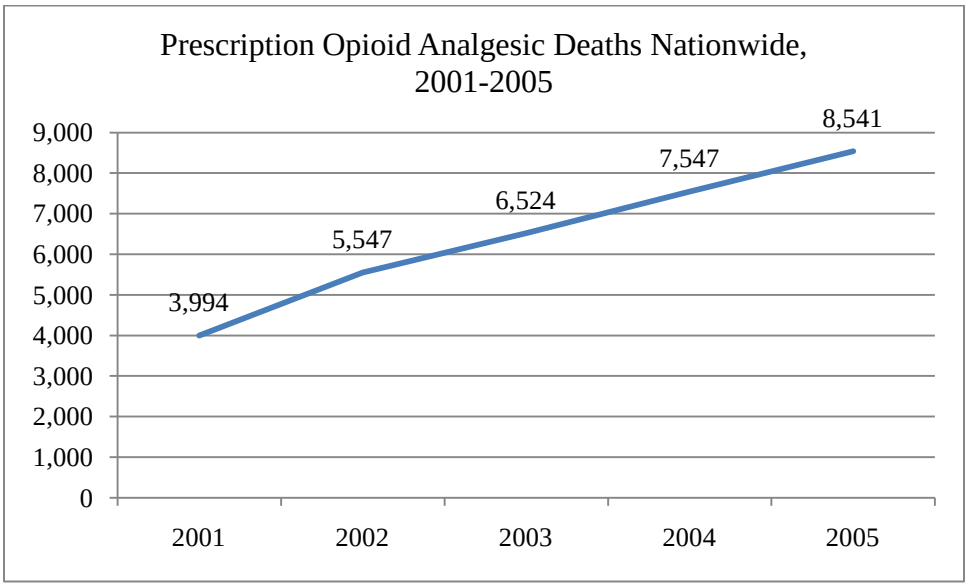


Results of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health from 2008 showed that Nevada ranked in the top five states in the percentage of people twelve and older who reported having used prescription drugs non-medically in the past year. Nevada ranked in the highest range of users in every age group except for those 12 to 17. Prescription drugs are distributed by Mexican drug cartels and gangs. Nevada's proximity to Mexico makes the state susceptible to trafficking of prescription drugs.

Prescription Drug Overdoses

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics, unintentional overdose deaths involving prescription opioids increased 114 percent from 2001 (3,994) to 2005 (8,541), the most recent nationwide data available. Further, the number of treatment admissions for prescription opioids as the primary drug of abuse increased 74 percent from 46,115 in 2002 to 80,131 in 2006, the most recent data available, according to the SAMHSA Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS).

Prescription Opioid Analgesic Deaths Nationwide, 2001-2005

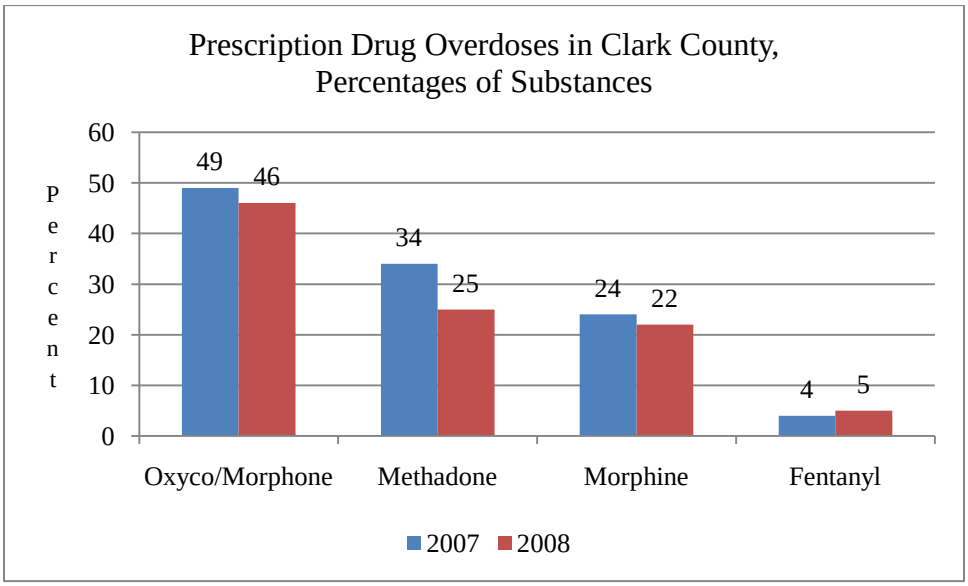


Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Prescription Drug Overdoses in Nevada

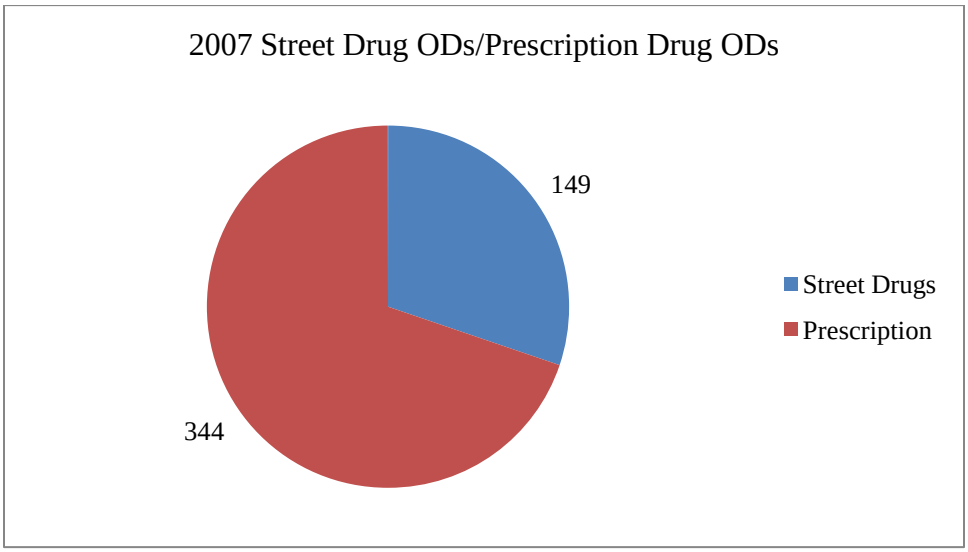
In 16 states, including Nevada, prescription painkillers used non-medically kill more people annually than auto accidents. ("In 16 States, Drug Deaths Overtake Traffic Fatals", Mike Strobbe, AP Medical Writer, September 3, 2009.) Most of the increase is attributed to prescription opiates such as Oxycontin, Vicodin and methadone. In the 1990s, physicians recognized that chronic pain was undertreated and this prompted a major change in how they prescribe pain medications. Now, about one in five U.S. adults are prescribed an opiate each year. Seventy five percent of the population of Nevada lives in Clark County and the Coroner's office there collects data on all autopsies done in the

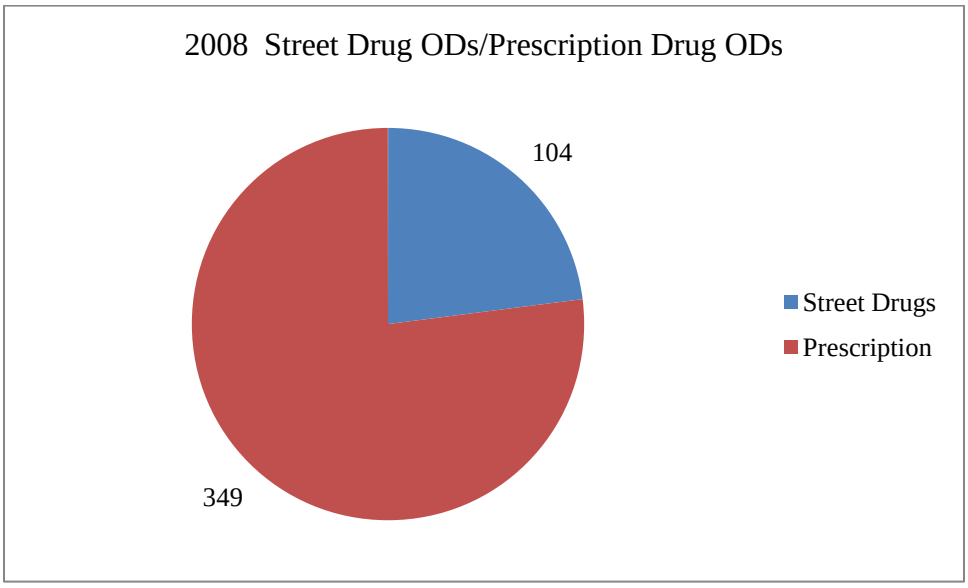
county. In 2007, 344 people died of prescription drug overdoses in Clark County and these people had ingested 1,525 medications (for an average of 4.4 medications each). In 2008, 349 people died of prescription drug overdoses and these people used 1,450 medications (for an average of 4.1 medications. The most commonly used prescription drugs used in these overdose cases were oxycodone/oxymorphone, methadone, and morphine. (Data from the Clark County Coroner's Office, 2009).



The majority of prescription drug overdoses in Clark County were considered to be accidents. The Medical Examiner's office in Clark County determines whether overdose deaths were accidental or intentional suicides. Deaths are considered suicides if the person had attempted suicide previously, had expressed suicidal ideation, engaged in suicidal behavior, taken an excessive amount of medication, left a suicide note or otherwise expressed their intention. Deaths are considered accidental if the amount of medication taken is not extreme but could cause death.

Street Drug Overdoses Compared to Prescription Drug Overdoses





In 2008, over three times as many people died of prescription drug overdoses as those who died from overdoses of street drugs. Street drugs include marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, inhalants, methamphetamine, LSD, heroin and PCP.

Between 1999 and 2006, US hospital admissions due to poisoning by prescription opioids, sedatives and tranquilizers rose from approximately 43,000 to about 71,000. That increase of 65 percent is about double the increase observed in hospitalizations for poisoning by other drugs and medicines. Opioids -- examples include morphine, methadone, OxyContin and the active ingredient in Percocet -- are powerful narcotic painkillers that can be habit-

forming. Some examples of sedatives or tranquilizers include Valium, Xanax, and Ativan. (Source: American Journal of Preventive Medicine, April 2010.)

Please contact Nan Kreher, Health Program Specialist, at SAPTA, 684-4098, with questions regarding this fact sheet.