

# Legal But Deadly: Abuse of OTC and Prescription Drugs Among Teens

*A Case Study in Assessment and Policy Development  
Mid-America Regional Public Health Leadership Institute Year 14 Fellows*

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The near fatal overdoses of several middle and high school students in the small metropolitan city of Bedrock prompted the State Health Department to initiate a campaign to form community coalitions to address the prevalence of OTC and prescription drug abuse regarding adolescents. The Health Department through its Local Health Units convened meetings with concerned individuals within the communities to discuss a potential policy and program development to address the issue.

This case study involves an analysis of the policy development process concerned in combating the abuse of prescription and OTC drugs as an emerging form of substance abuse among adolescents in a hypothetical community. The findings will focus on the grass-roots efforts of the State’s health department in partnership with community-based coalitions in assessing the scope of the problem to determine policy development as well as problem resolution.

Prescription and over-the-counter medications may appeal to adolescents for several reasons. They are easily accessible and are perceived as safe when compared with street drugs. These drugs are legally prescribed and FDA-approved. Most teens believe that using OTC and prescription medications to get high is much safer than using illegal drugs. Many adolescents report having being offered these types of drugs to get high, suggesting that this form of drug abuse has indeed penetrated teen culture.

This case study will demonstrate how policy is developed at the local levels, by focusing on 3 aspects of the 10 essential public health services: 1) informing, educating and empowering citizens, 2) mobilizing community partnerships to address health concerns, and 3) the development of policies to initiate corrective measures. This study will involve a critical analysis of the local health delivery system, including an evaluation of the roles of the county’s Local Health Units and Independent School Districts in their collaborative effort to address this growing health crisis.

## **HISTORY**

Prescription drug abuse has become a serious problem within Bedrock schools. This case study examines how Bedrock Hometown Health Coalition assessed this problem to determine policy development and a resolution to this problem. These efforts resulted in the development of a community-wide coalition to tackle the “Reuse Abuse” problem of prescription drugs in Bedrock. The “Reuse Abuse” partnership is a subcommittee of the Bedrock Hometown Health Coalition, which is the initiative of the Division of Health to tackle community public health issues.

### The Reuse Abuse Sub-committee

Health Department:	Ms Fred Flintstone, LHU Administrator Ms Betty Rubble, Health Educator
Bedford School District:	Mr. Boulders, School Counselor Ms Rockwell, School Counselor Ms Stonewall, School Nurse
Bedrock Mayor Office:	Mr. Bam-bam, Youth Counselor Ms Pebbles, Youth Counselor

While Bedrock’s Hometown Health Coalition was investigating information on gang activity School Counselor, Ms Rockwell voiced concerns regarding rising number of youth abusing prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Last year alone, over twenty Bedrock students were expelled due to prescription drug abuse. She stated that prescription drugs are appealing to adolescents because they are low-cost and easy to obtain. Since these drugs are legal our youth are under the impression it is okay to take them. She said a teenager who would never use cocaine might not think twice about taking some of his mother’s Oxy-Contin pills. During this discussion School Nurse, Ms Stonewall and School Counselor, Mr. Boulder expressed similar concerns. It was Petra Littlerock (Community Activist) story of Prescription Drug Addiction that motivated the coalition to action. Below is her story:

### **Petra's story of abuse**

I had mis-used and abused prescription medications, including over-the-counter medicines for nearly 20 years. Manipulation and lies I told to my family, doctors, dentists and co-workers to maintain my habit had become routine. I was only 16 years old when I hit and killed a pedestrian, who, I had learned much later, leapt in front of me in order to commit suicide. The emotional pain nearly destroyed me for so many years I took pills to numb my feelings of shame and guilt.

Finally I realized I needed help after an overdose of painkillers. I went into a treatment facility to withdraw from the various pills on which I had become dependent. I was told by my therapist to seek support from a prescription addiction group. After thorough

research, I found there wasn't such a group in the state of Arkansas and only a few in the entire United States. I was asked to be a part of the "Reuse Abuse" campaign in Bedrock Arkansas to tell my story to youth and parent groups. My goal and mission is to help others with prescription drug problems and help save teens from this potentially deadly disease.

**Other Real-life examples cited:**

- A. A female student left the building to go outside and stated that she couldn't see. EMS was called and assessed the student who admitted taking Oxycodone. This was the reason for the sudden blindness to direct sunlight.
- B. A female student was advertising the sale of drugs by having the word "Skittles" and "Lunchbox" written plainly on her hands so other students could see. Another student reported the situation to school officials.
- C. Students attend private parties where a "punchbowl" is used to collect a variety of pills that students have acquired or stolen. Students then dip into the punchbowl and take unknown medications to see the affect.
- D. Students sometimes use Tylenol PM or other sleep aides after school to counteract the effect of drugs they have taken during the day. This will help bring them down to a seemingly normal state before arriving home. One student was caught by school officials with 48 packets of sleep aides.
- E. A female student gave a male student (who was asthmatic) some unknown pills when he complained of having a headache. The male student took the pill to the nurse to determine what kind of pill it was. The pill had a number on it only and not the manufacturer, so the nurse called Poison Control who determined that it was medication that was contraindicated for individuals with asthma.
- F. "Sherm" is a street name for black cigars that are dipped in formaldehyde and then smoked by students to get high.

After the coalition meeting Ms Flintstone, Administrator of Bedrock Local Health Department conducted research and found....according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health prescription drugs are the second most abused drug behind marijuana in this country. Nearly one million youth between the ages of 12-17 reported that they abused a prescription drug. According to the National Drug Intelligence Center has tripled.... young people attain prescription drugs mainly by receiving, purchasing or stealing them from friends, family and others who have legal prescription. Many Internet sites sell prescription drugs with little or no requirements.

In researching Partnership for a Drug Free America Ms Flintstone found:

- 1 in 6 teens have abused prescription pain medication
- 1 in 10 report abusing prescription stimulants and tranquilizers
- 1 in 11 abused cough medication

- Painkillers are the most common pharmaceutical abused by teens, especially by younger teens.
- Stimulant abuse is more common among older teens and college students than younger teens.
- Girls are more likely to be current (past month) abusers of prescription medications than boys (4.3 vs. 3.6 percent) (*Source: 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*)
- An estimated 9 million people aged 12 and older used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons in 1999 ( *Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse*)
- The Internet has opened easy access to dangerous and addictive drugs sold by Rogue Websites linked to disreputable doctors. (*Source: Washington Post*)

At the next Reuse Abuse Coalition meeting Ms Flintstone presented these findings voiced her concerns. She also presented the Bedrock Youth Risk Behavior Survey at this coalition meeting. Results of this survey were:

- 37 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students have used illegal drugs one or more times during their life
- 48 percent of 11 grade students have used illegal drugs one or more times their life
- 50 percent of 12 grade students have used illegal drugs one or more times their life
- 11 percent of 10 grade students have tried illegal drugs before the age of 13.
- 11 percent of 11 grade students have tried illegal drugs before the age of 13.
- 8 percent of 12 grade students have tried illegal drugs before the age of 13.
- 21 percent of 10 grade students have used illegal drugs one or more times during the past 30 days.
- 30 percent of 11 grade students have used illegal drugs one or more times during the past 30 days.
- 28 percent of 12 grade students have used illegal drugs one or more times during the past 30 days.

During the discussion Ms Pebbles, Counselor for Mayor Youth Program said that Bedrock Youth Committee was interested in making the “Reuse Abuse” drug problem their Community Project. This Committee developed the Teen Peer Council made up of 70 Bedrock Teens from various schools throughout the community. The Coalitions next step was to identify resolutions that would address this community problem.

### Mobilizing Community Partnerships:

- Ms Pebbles, Bedrock Youth Counsel identified stakeholders which were
  1. Bedrock Health Department
  2. Bedrock Medical Center
  3. Bedrock School District
  4. Bedrock Mayor Youth Council
  5. Bedrock Faith Community
  6. Bedrock State and Community Agencies
  7. Bedrock Law Enforcement
  8. Bedrock Parent Teacher Association
  9. Bedrock Mental Health/ Drug Treatment Center
  10. Bedrock Pharmacy
  11. Arkansas Legislators

This committee had great community support for this public health threat.

- Initiated public town meeting for the following reasons:
  1. Discuss Teen Prescription Drug Abuse
  2. Discuss Rogue Internet Pharmacy
  3. Discuss potential school policy to address reuse abuse of prescription drugs.
  4. Legislators attended town meeting and supported the outcome
- Drug Fact Sheet developed by Teen Peer Council to be used for
  1. Distribution during PTA meeting
  2. New Student Packets
  3. Press Conference was held by Bedrock Mayor and Hometown Health Coalition
- Initiated Bedrock Press Conference to alert community of “Reuse Abuse” of prescription drug problem. Here is how the community can help:
  1. Place prescription medicine in a **secure** place
  2. Get rid of any unused medicine. You can always get another prescription, but your child can’t ever get back the year of school they will lose if caught.
  3. Keep a count of the number of pills you have.
  4. Be aware if the seriousness of this offense.
  5. Talk with your child immediately about the consequences.

6. Know your school policy
7. **Remember any drug not prescribed for you is an illegal drug!**

- Developed Teen Peer Counsel to promote “Reuse Abuse” program in the community and schools of Bedrock. This was accomplished through:
  1. Posters
  2. T-Shirts
  3. Slogans
  4. Plays
- Teen Peer Counsel developed the following Mission and Vision Statements:

***Mission Statement:***

*Our mission of hope is to reach the millions of teens who are afflicted or affected by prescription addiction, including over-the-counter medicines. We offer voices of comfort, support and understanding to those who are reaching out for a way out.*

***Vision Statement:***

*To educate and offer solutions to the vast number of teens who become concerned about misuse or abuse of prescribed and non-prescribed medications.*

## **CLOSING**

“Our nation is in the throes of an epidemic of controlled prescription drug abuse and addiction,” said Joseph A. Califano, Jr., CASA’s chairman and president and former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. “While America has been congratulating itself in recent years on curbing increases in alcohol and illicit drug abuse, and in the decline in teen smoking, abuse of prescription drugs has been stealthily, but sharply, rising.” Teen prescription drug addiction and drug abuse will continue to increase in the United States unless both healthcare professionals and the general public stand up and take notice. The Re-Use Abuse Coalition must evaluate stakeholders to insure effectiveness of policy development and efforts of the community. Community remains rallied around these efforts through their public health system due to the leadership of Ms

**Flintstone and Ms Rubble. Bedrock School Board developed new policy to deal with prescription drug abuse on school grounds which is:**

1. **Students were expelled for the remainder of school year if caught selling even one prescription pill on school grounds. (This year alone over twenty Bedrock students has learned the hard way.)**
2. **Students were expelled for the remainder of school year if caught taking a prescription pill without a prescription.**
3. **Referral process was developed for drug treatment**
4. **Counseling was provided for Parents and Child**

## **5. Children were referred to Alternative School**

**Bedrock Community supported this project through their public health system.**

### **STUDY GUIDE**

6. Identify stakeholders who were missing from the Coalition
7. Discuss school policy for being expelled (do they think it is too harsh)
8. Did Coalition address treatment outcomes?
9. What additional goals need to be addressed by the coalition?
10. On a scale of one to five (Weak to Strong), how would you rate the coalition in the following areas?
  - a) Vision/sense of purpose
  - b) Coalition structure
  - c) Outreach
  - d) Research
  - e) Relationship with stakeholders
  - f) Policy Development
  - g) Assessment

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