



OSAM-O-GRAM



DATE: January 2007

DATELINE: Ohio

Wright State University & the University of Akron

Targeted Response Initiative on Substance Abuse among Older Adults Part II: Nature and Extent of Substance Abuse Problems

Alcohol abuse and dependency were described as the most common drug problems among seniors in Ohio. Some social service providers estimated that about 10% of their older-aged clients have alcohol abuse/dependency problems. Being male and of lower socioeconomic status were reported as the most common demographic characteristics of older-aged people with alcohol problems. Older-aged people with alcohol problems typically drink in the solitude of their own residences, often spending the largest portions of their limited financial resources on alcohol.

Pharmaceutical opioids, such as Vicodin® (hydrocodone & acetaminophen), Percocet® (oxycodone & acetaminophen), and OxyContin® (oxycodone extended release), and **benzodiazepines**, particularly Xanax® (alprazolam) and Ativan® (lorazepam), were reported as the most commonly abused prescription drugs among older adults across Ohio. In most areas of the state it was reported that the abuse of prescription drugs is more typical among older-aged women than men. For many seniors, the problematic use of pharmaceutical drugs can be concealed more easily, and is viewed as a less stigmatizing behavior, than abuse of alcohol or illegal drugs. According to a treatment provider from Cincinnati, *"What a lot of elderly think...anything prescribed by a doctor is okay."* Since most seniors take a variety of medications, it is difficult for service providers to identify cases of abuse. According to participants, over-prescribing and "doctor shopping" are the most common ways seniors obtain pharmaceuticals for illicit use. Reportedly, some older adults sell their prescriptions to supplement their incomes. Others may be preyed upon by friends and family members hoping to steal their medications from them. A 63-year-old African-American man from Toledo who is a recovering drug abuser, reported:

I know some [seniors] get 'em [pain medication] and like 'em. I know some get 'em to sell. They go in and they make all kinda excuses, you know, to get the good pain pills. And then they sell 'em so that they can get something else. They may not be too turned on to the pills, but that's a source of income to get them what they want. So yes, there's people that do that. They can go in there with their infirmaries, and they know the story to tell the doctor to get 'em.

Use of **heroin** was reported as less common among older-aged adults, and typically concentrated among African Americans who had been addicted to heroin for many years. In the senior population, **marijuana** use is often related to self-medication of various health problems. Some older adults are lifelong users of the drug. Similar to the general user population, older-aged users view marijuana as a "safe" drug. Some respondents reported an increasing trend of **crack** use among the older-aged adults, especially among those who live in communities where illegal drug use and sales are more common. Several areas of the state reported that elderly men get introduced to illicit drugs such as crack cocaine because of their involvement with younger, drug using women. For example, a service provider from the Akron area commented, *"Older men buy it [crack] for younger women and use it for sex. The 'vultures' come out, and they get the older men to buy it for them."*

OSAM findings suggest that substance abuse issues among seniors are very complex and vary substantially by the drugs used. Older-aged adults involved with illicit drugs such as heroin or crack cocaine appear to be substantially different from seniors abusing only alcohol or prescription medications. More comprehensive studies are vital to planning for the future as "baby boomers" continue to age.

OSAM-O-GRAMS report key findings of the Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring (OSAM) Network. Informants located throughout the state use qualitative and quantitative data to provide semiannual monitoring of substance abuse trends. The OSAM Network is funded by the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services by contract to Wright State University and by subcontract to the University of Akron. This OSAM-O-GRAM is based on the January 2007 OSAM Network meeting.

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