

Preventing Opioid Use in Rural Adolescents: The Role of Physician Assistants in Early Mental Health Screening  
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Adolescent opioid misuse continues to be a significant public health concern in the United States. Untreated or inadequately managed mental health conditions are strongly associated with an increased risk of opioid use disorder (OUD) among adolescents.<sup>1,2</sup> Rural adolescents are particularly vulnerable, with 6.8% of rural adolescents misusing opioids compared to only 5.3% of opioid misuse in large urban areas.<sup>3</sup> These vulnerabilities particularly take place in rural states within central Appalachia like West Virginia, Kentucky, and Southeast Ohio.<sup>3</sup> Many drug abuse disorders start in early adolescence due to experimentation, peer pressure, adverse home environments, and familial addiction.<sup>5,6</sup> Many symptoms of opioid abuse often don't appear until eighteen years old, making treatment more challenging.<sup>7</sup>

In 2023, 9.2 million young adults (27.1%) and 2.2 million adolescents (8.5%) in the United States were recorded to have a substance abuse disorder, with opioids accounting for a significant portion of misuse among these groups.<sup>8</sup> Opioids alter productivity, organ function, overall health, often culminating in overdose or death.<sup>6</sup> Fentanyl has surged in prevalence causing an increase from 32% of opioid overdose deaths in 2018 to 76% in 2023. From 1999 to 2019, suicide rates in rural areas rose by 50%, while suicide rates in urban locations only increased to 31%.<sup>4</sup> These stark disparities reflect the growing burden of untreated mental illness and socioeconomic hardships placed on adolescents that drive rural adolescents to self-medicate with opioids.<sup>1,2</sup>

The purpose of this review is to demonstrate the relationship between untreated mental illness and OUD among rural adolescents.<sup>1,2</sup> It also identifies environmental and healthcare-related risk factors that contribute to opioid use in rural communities.<sup>3</sup> Contributing factors include lack of education, financial instability, chronic illness burden, isolation, lack of health care access, and cultural stigma around mental health treatment.<sup>1,3</sup>

Preventative strategies are proposed, including early mental health screenings using tools such as the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) to identify and treat mental health disorders. Also, the implementation of community events to mitigate isolation and promote social engagement. Untreated psychiatric conditions along with these factors cause adolescents to be vulnerable to OUD, emphasizing the need for early prevention.

The role of Physician Assistants within these communities is to work collaboratively with schools, hospitals, and families to identify at-risk adolescents and provide early treatment for chronic illnesses, especially mental health disorders. The NCCPA noted a total of 3,200 Physician Assistants working in Psychiatry, a 2.4% increase since 2020.<sup>8</sup> Despite this growth, only 690 Physician Assistants work in underserved/rural locations as of 2024.<sup>9</sup> This workforce disparity directly correlates to the limited access to timely and affordable care. Expanding Physician Assistants in rural behavioral health, primary care, and pediatric settings may improve early identification and management of mental health conditions and chronic illnesses. Increased access to preventative care can deter individuals from using opioids as a coping strategy and create resilience within these communities.

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