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SAMHSA Study: Alcohol Abuse Higher Among College Students

U.S. college students seeking treatment for substance abuse are more likely to be having trouble with alcohol but less likely to be abusing drugs like heroin, cocaine or methamphetamine than their non-student peers, according to a new government study.

Researchers at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) analyzed data from 2009, when about 374,000 people between the ages of 18 and 24 were treated for substance abuse or dependence in the United States.

The overwhelming majority of those admitted for treatment -- about 362,000 -- were young adults who were not enrolled in college or post-secondary school, the researchers found.

About 12,000 of the admissions -- or 3.2 percent of the total -- involved young adults enrolled in higher education.

When researchers looked at patterns of abuse within the two groups, they found significant differences.

The young adults enrolled in higher education who sought treatment were much more likely to be abusing alcohol than their non-college peers, researchers said.

Nearly half of the college kids -- 46.6 percent -- admitted for treatment in 2009 were having problems with alcohol, compared with 30.6 percent of the non-students.

Pamela Hyde, an official with SAMHSA, said the results underscored the "pervasive and potentially devastating role that alcohol plays on far too many college campuses."

When it came to most drugs, however, college students had markedly lower rates of treatment admissions than non-students their age.

Only 7.2 percent of the college students seeking treatment in 2009 were abusing heroin, compared with 16.1 percent of the non-students.

Cocaine admission rates were more than twice as high for non-students than for students and methamphetamine admissions were more than four times higher for non-students, the researchers said.

Marijuana remains a significant problem with both groups, the researchers found, accounting for 30.9 percent of the treatment admissions involving college students and 30 percent of the admissions involving non-students.

SAMHSA is the unit within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that focuses on substance abuse and mental illness.

The study was based on an analysis of SAMHSA's 2009 Treatment Episode Data Set, which drew on reports from thousands of publicly supported substance abuse treatment facilities in the country.

The report is available online at http://www.samhsa.gov.