

## Effectiveness of a Mass Media Campaign for Parents on Teen Prescription Drug Use

### Introduction

THIS BRIEF DESCRIBES THE DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION of a mass media health campaign to reduce teen prescription drug abuse. The campaign targets parents of teens ages 14 – 16 and has two communication objectives: 1) to increase parents' awareness of the public health problem of teen abuse of scheduled prescription medications, and 2) to prompt parents to secure such drugs in the home. The campaign is an initiative of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (NYADMC), a large social marketing effort that uses mass media to deliver drug prevention messages to parents and teens.

The brief covers two related topics. First, we provide background on the emerging public health problem of teen prescription drug abuse. We then describe the NYADMC and its prescription drug prevention initiative, and report the results of a pre-launch/post-launch evaluation of its effectiveness.

### Background

Prescription drug abuse among teens is a significant and escalating public health problem in the United States. In 2005, 2.1 million teens abused prescription drugs, and now there are as many new teen prescription drugs abusers as new users of marijuana (NSDUH, 2006). Pain relievers or opioids, such as Vicodin® or Oxycontin®, are the most frequently abused prescription drugs, closely followed by stimulant medication, such as Ritalin® and Adderall®. In 2005, almost 10 percent of 12th graders abused a prescription painkiller, and more than eight percent abused a prescription stimulant (Johnston et al., 2006). These data are striking when compared to usage rates for other drugs. Several national surveys indicate that teen abuse of alcohol, marijuana, and "street drugs" such as cocaine and heroin is decreasing while prescription drug abuse is rising (Johnston et al., 2006; NSDUH, 2006; PATS, 2006).

In response to these national trends, the NYADMC launched a prescription drug prevention initiative in early 2008. The NYADMC is a large-scale social marketing campaign that was

established under congressional mandate in 1998 to discourage first time use of illicit drugs and to encourage current drug users to stop using. It targets teens, parents and other influential adults.

The NYADMC prescription drug initiative strives specifically to increase parents' awareness of prescription drug abuse and urges them to control the supply of prescription drugs in the home. Parents are an important target for such messages because of two roles they play in their teens' lives: as influential sources of information about drugs, and as gatekeepers to prescription drugs in the home.

Teens consistently report that parents are their most influential source of information about drugs, and youth who learn much from their parents about the risks of drugs in general are up to 50 percent less likely to abuse drugs than youth who do not learn about drugs at home (PATS, 2006). While 70 percent of parents report discussing drugs such as marijuana "a lot" with their youth, only 36 percent of parents report discussing the risks of using prescription drugs (ibid). Parents may not discuss prescription drugs with teens because they are unaware of their risks or the prevalence of abuse.

Parents are also gatekeepers to prescription drugs in the home. Most teen prescription drug abusers report that their primary source of these drugs is from other people's prescriptions. More than fifty percent of teens say prescription drugs are easily obtained in this way (PATS, 2006). Therefore, encouraging parents to secure prescription drugs in the home may reduce teen abuse of these drugs.

Working from this background on the problem, the NYADMC used behavior change theory to empirically inform the development of prescription drug campaign advertising, as theory-based public health campaigns are more likely to change behavior (Noar, 2006). To this end, the NYADMC builds its communications, and subsequently evaluates them, from the foundation of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). TPB suggests that exposure to persuasive information subsequently produces shifts in beliefs, intentions, and behavior (Ajzen &

Fishbein, 1980). For the prescription drug campaign, the advertising sought to change beliefs about the risks and prevalence of prescription drug abuse, and to increase parents' intentions to limit teen access to prescription drugs in the home. Table 1 lists the beliefs and intentions targeted by the prescription drug campaign.

## NYADMC tracking study: methods and measures

The NYADMC tracking study is an ongoing cross-sectional study that evaluates the connection between exposure to campaign messages and beliefs, attitudes, and intentions that are empirically linked to prevention of youth drug use, such as those outlined in Table 1 below. The parent tracking study has collected data on the effectiveness of the NYADMC since 1999. For

<b>Table 1: Theoretical constructs targeted by the NYADMC prescription drug campaign</b>	
<b>Beliefs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prescription drug abuse is prevalent among teens.</li> <li>• It is possible that my child could experiment with prescription drugs, now or in the future.</li> <li>• Prescription drug abuse among teens is a serious problem.</li> <li>• Teens who abuse prescription drugs often get them from family and friends.</li> <li>• Using other people's prescription drugs could be dangerous for teens.</li> <li>• Prescription drugs in your home could be abused by teens.</li> </ul>
<b>Intentions</b>	<p>In the next month will you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safeguard prescription drugs in home?</li> <li>• Monitor prescription drug quantities and control access?</li> <li>• Set clear rules for teens about all drug use, including not sharing medicine and always following medical providers' advice?</li> <li>• Be a good role model by following a medical providers' rules with your own medicines?</li> <li>• Properly conceal and dispose of old or unused medicines in the trash?</li> <li>• Ask friends and family to safeguard their prescription drugs?</li> </ul>

the parent portion of the tracking study, parents of teens ages 11 – 16 are recruited through random digit dialing and complete an 18-minute telephone interview. One hundred interviews with parents are completed each week throughout the year. Data are collected anonymously, and basic demographic questions are asked at the end of the survey, including age, marital status, employment status, highest education obtained, annual household income level, and child's current grade in school.

In November 2007, the NYADMC added measures on beliefs, attitudes, and intentions toward prescription drug abuse prevention to the tracking study to serve as a baseline for the

prescription drug campaign. The items on these measures were drawn from the beliefs and intentions targeted by the campaign, including perceptions of teen prescription drug use as a serious and prevalent problem, and parents' intentions to safeguard the supply of prescription drugs in the home. Three months of baseline data, consisting of over 1200 parent interviews, were collected before the campaign launched on February 3, 2008, during the Super Bowl broadcast. NYADMC prescription drug prevention campaign consists of TV, print, and Internet advertising; public relations outreach; and point-of-purchase messaging in drug stores. Figure 1 provides the transcript of the Super Bowl launch advertisement for this campaign.

Data collected prior to the launch of the campaign (November 2007 – January 2008) were considered “pre-launch” or baseline data. Data from 2600 interviews conducted after the launch of the campaign (February 2008 – July 2008) were considered post-launch data. The demographic characteristics of respondents in the pre-launch and post-launch group were similar. Statistical comparisons between pre-launch and post-launch data revealed the following four key findings about the impact of the prescription drug campaign.

## Findings

### Awareness of campaign messages spiked significantly after the campaign was launched with the Super Bowl ad, and remains high to date.

The data suggest that campaign advertising resulted in high awareness of the prescription drug media messages. More specifically, data prior to the launch of the campaign showed that approximately 30 percent of parents were aware of advertising about prescription drug prevention. This spiked to 64 percent immediately after campaign launch, growing to a maximum of 71 percent in May 2008. These findings are reinforced with data from the campaign's websites. After the first campaign advertisement launched, traffic to the campaign website increased more than 530 percent, and the increased traffic was sustained at 56 percent over the months following the launch.

### Parents' beliefs about the risks of teen prescription drug abuse increased significantly after launch of the campaign.

Exposure to the campaign is associated with beliefs about teen prescription drug use that are more strongly prevention-oriented. For example, from pre-launch to post-launch, parents who were aware of advertising were significantly more likely to feel that teen prescription drug use is a prevalent and serious problem.

**Figure 1: Transcript of campaign launch ad**



This commercial opens on a sketchy guy talking to camera.

Sketchy guy: What's this... what's this, documentary? Man right here this is my business. Buying, selling. Whatever you know. It's slow. Bizness is off man, sales are down. It seems like half my customers they don't even need

me anymore you know. They're getting high for free. Out of the medicine cabinets. How am I supposed to compete with that? You got kids? Well next time something goes south with your kids don't look at me man. Ain't my problem. I didn't do it. (laughs) I wish I did



VO: Teens don't need a drug dealer to get high. Safeguard your prescriptions. Safeguard your teens.

SUPER:  
Parents. The anti-drug.  
theantiidrug.com  
1-800-788-2800

### Parents who saw advertising from the prescription drug campaign were significantly more likely to report intentions to control the supply of prescription drugs in the home.

Of the six intention statements in the tracking measure, there was a significant difference from pre-launch to post-launch on five, including parents' intentions in the next month to safeguard prescription drugs in home, monitor prescription drug quantities and control access, set clear rules for teens about all drug use, including prescription drugs, properly conceal and dispose of old or unused medicines in the trash, and ask friends and family to safeguard their prescription drugs.

### The campaign had no observed effect on teen interest in prescription drugs

As mentioned above, there was significant empirical support for targeting parents with this campaign, but there were also practical considerations behind this decision. Messaging directly to teens about an emerging drug of abuse, particularly in a national campaign, carries the risk of increasing curiosity about these drugs. To avoid this unintended consequence, parent messages were qualitatively and quantitatively tested with teens to probe this issue prior to airing, and measures were added to the teen tracking study to assess teens' interest in these drugs. There is evidence such careful message development, combined with stringent media planning to ensure minimal spill of the parent advertising into teen media, was effective: there were no changes in teen interest in prescription drugs over the course of the campaign, suggesting the risk of unintended effects from this campaign is low.

## Implications

The evaluation discussed above was supplemented with a qualitative assessment of the non-advertising aspects of the campaign: earned media impressions, or additional media coverage prompted by the campaign, on the topic of teen prescription drug use. Over 107 million media impressions were obtained through campaign outreach, which spread campaign messages into local markets. The death of actor Heath Ledger from an overdose of prescription drugs in the weeks before the campaign launched may have also put this issue on the public agenda and advanced communication efforts in two ways. First, it may have provided a "teachable moment" for parents to discuss the issue with their teens. Second, it provided the NYADMC an opportunity to piggyback on the tremendous media coverage of this event with consistent and relevant prevention messaging. The non-advertising portion of the NYADMC received the Silver Anvil Award from the Public Relations Society of America. This award recognizes highly effective programs that use research to form strategies, track results and prove effectiveness.

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the prescription drug prevention campaign was successful. From the pre-launch to the post-launch period, awareness of prescription drug prevention advertising was significantly associated with changes in beliefs about prescription drug abuse as a serious and prevalent public health problem, and greater intentions to limit the supply of prescription drugs in the home. During a similar timeframe, a nationwide survey of parents also found perceptions of the risks of prescription drug abuse increased significantly (PATS, 2009). Because TPB suggests that intentions to perform a behavior are a strong predictor of actual behavior, the significant changes in parent intentions to safeguard and otherwise protect prescription drugs may translate into parents empowered to take action to protect their teens from the risks of prescription drug abuse.

## Citations

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