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## Current Rural Drug Use in the US Midwest

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### Abstract

The nature and challenge of illicit drug use in the United States continues to change rapidly, evolving in reaction to myriad social, economic, and local forces. While the use of illicit drugs affects every region of the country, most of our current information about drug use comes from large urban areas. Data on rural drug use and its harms justify greater attention. Record overdose rates, unexpected outbreaks of HIV, and a dearth of treatment facilities point to a rapidly worsening health situation. While health sciences have made considerable progress in understanding the etiology of drug use and uncovering the link between drug use and its myriad associated harms, this promising scientific news has not always translated to better health outcomes. The scope of the problem in the Central Plains of the US is growing, and can be estimated from available sources. Clear remedies for this rising level of abuse are available, but few have been implemented. Suggestions for short-term policy remedies are discussed.

### Keywords

Rural drug use; Methamphetamine; HIV; Opioids; Addiction

### Introduction

The use of illicit drugs affects every region of the United States, but most of our information about drug use comes from large urban areas [1]. This is true despite two decades of increasingly visible rural drug use and its related harms [2, 3]. While once restricted to southern California, methamphetamine has had its largest impacts in rural states such as Oklahoma, Iowa, and Missouri [4]. More recently, Nebraska has joined this list, with increasing evidence of following in its neighbor's footsteps. The most recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data for Nebraska reveal that substance abuse treatment rates for prescription opiate use in 2010 was seven times what it was a decade earlier, and opiate-related overdose deaths in Nebraska are rapidly approaching the number of deaths due to automobile accidents [5]. In neighboring Missouri, overdose deaths have exceeded automobile deaths for several years [5].

Understanding and preventing health-related harms arising from drug use is complex [6, 7]. Years of addiction studies point to multifactorial causes for drug abuse, ranging from altered

**Table 1**

The scope of illicit drug use in 32 contiguous counties of eastern Nebraska, Western Iowa and northern Kansas.

Number of counties	32
Population of counties (P)	740,705
Arrests related to drugs (UCRP)	978
ER admissions for drug use (SAMHSA)	3,050
Est. drug user pop. size (5% arrest rate)	19,560
Est. drug user pop. size (15% ER rate)	20,333
Drug user pop. size as percentage of P	2.7%