



# Developing a Better Understanding

## UNDERSTANDING MENTAL ILLNESS AND ADDICTION

Each day in communities throughout Ohio and across the nation individuals live with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. These individuals are our family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Sometimes we know about their health conditions and sometimes we do not. As we look to continue collectively crafting policy and putting in place strategies, initiatives, and programs designed to assist individuals living with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, it is important that we develop a better understanding of the illnesses and their prevalence.

### Mental Illness

Mental illnesses are common in the United States. Nearly one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness (52.9 million in 2020). Mental illnesses include many different conditions that vary in degree of severity, ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Research shows that mental illnesses are common in the United States, affecting tens of millions of people each year. Estimates suggest that only half of people with mental illnesses receive treatment.

The National Institute of Mental Health provides the following definitions of mental illness:

- **Any mental illness (AMI)** is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder. AMI can vary in impact, ranging from no impairment to mild, moderate, and even severe impairment (e.g., individuals with serious mental illness as defined below).
- **Serious mental illness (SMI)** is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. The burden of mental illnesses is particularly concentrated among those who experience disability due to SMI.

AMI encompasses all recognized mental illnesses. SMI is a smaller and more severe subset of AMI.

### Substance Use Disorders and Addiction

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, addiction is defined as a chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use despite adverse consequences. It is considered a brain disorder, because it involves functional changes to brain circuits involved in reward, stress, and self-control. Those changes may last a long time after a person has stopped taking drugs.

The 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 20.4 million people in the United States were diagnosed with a substance use disorder in the past year. Fewer than 50% of those individuals received SUD treatment.

Addiction is a lot like other diseases, such as heart disease. Both disrupt the normal, healthy functioning of an organ in the body, both have serious harmful effects, and both are, in many cases, preventable and treatable. If left untreated, they can last a lifetime and may lead to death.

As with other diseases and disorders, the likelihood of developing an addiction differs from person to person, and no single factor determines whether a person will become addicted to drugs. In general, the more *risk factors* a person has, the greater the chance that taking drugs will lead to drug use and addiction. *Protective factors*, on the other hand, reduce a person's risk. Risk and protective factors may be either environmental or biological.

### Treatment Works. People Recover.

Mental illnesses and addiction are treatable chronic illnesses that require access to early intervention, crisis care, treatment services, and long-term recovery supports. Every person, when given access to the right treatment and supports, has the opportunity to recover. Recovery will not be the same for all individuals. The level and length of treatment and supports may vary greatly like treatment does for any other physical illness, such as cancer, diabetes, or heart disease. Recovery has many pathways and no two individuals will take the exact same path.

## 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Conducted annually, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) provides nationally representative data on the use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs; substance use disorders; receipt of substance use treatment; mental health issues; and the use of mental health services among the civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 12 or older in the United States. The following represent key findings of the 2021 data. The NSDUH data is helpful as state and local decision-makers work to develop and implement strategies and solutions to better serve individuals impacted by mental illness and/or addiction.

### Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior

- Among adolescents aged 12 to 17 in 2021, 12.7% (or 3.3 million people) had serious thoughts of suicide, 5.9% (or 1.5 million people) made a suicide plan, and 3.4% (or 892,000 people) attempted suicide in the past year.
- Among adults aged 18 or older in 2021, 4.8% (or 12.3 million people) had serious thoughts of suicide, 1.4% (or 3.5 million people) made a suicide plan, and 0.7% (or 1.7 million people) attempted suicide in the past year.

### Mental Health among Youth

- Among adolescents aged 12 to 17 in 2021, 20.1% (or 5.0 million people) had a past year major depressive episode (MDE), and 14.7% (or 3.7 million people) had a past year MDE with severe impairment.
- Adolescents aged 12 to 17 in 2021 with a past year MDE were more likely than those without a past year MDE to have used most illicit drugs in the past year. For example, 27.7% of adolescents aged 12 to 17 with a past year MDE used illicit drugs in the past year compared with 10.7% of those without a past year MDE.

### Mental Health among Adults

- Among adults aged 18 or older in 2021, 22.8% (or 57.8 million people) had any mental illness (AMI) in the past year. The percentage of adults aged 18 or older with AMI in the past year was highest among young adults aged 18 to 25 (33.7% or 11.3 million people), followed by adults aged 26 to 49 (28.1% or 28.8 million people), then by adults aged 50 or older (15.0% or 17.7 million people).
- In 2021, 5.5% of adults aged 18 or older (or 14.1 million people) had serious mental illness (SMI) in the past year. The percentage of adults aged 18 or older with SMI was highest among young adults aged 18 to 25 (11.4% or 3.8 million people), followed by adults aged 26 to 49 (7.1% or 7.3 million people), then by adults aged 50 or older (2.5% or 3.0 million people).

### Substance Use in the Past Month

- Among people aged 12 or older in 2021, 57.8% (or 161.8 million people) used tobacco, alcohol, or an illicit drug in the past month (also defined as “current use”), including 47.5% (or 133.1 million people) who drank alcohol, 19.5% (or 54.7 million people) who used a tobacco product, and 14.3% (or 40.0 million people) who used an illicit drug.

### Alcohol Use

- Among the 133.1 million current alcohol users aged 12 or older in 2021, 60.0 million people (or 45.1%) were past month binge drinkers. The percentage of people who were past month binge drinkers was highest among young adults aged 18 to 25 (29.2% or 9.8 million people), followed by adults aged 26 or older (22.4% or 49.3 million people), then by adolescents aged 12 to 17 (3.8% or 995,000 people).

### Illicit Drug Use

- In 2021, marijuana was the most commonly used illicit drug, with 18.7% of people aged 12 or older (or 52.5 million people) using it in the past year. The percentage was highest among young adults aged 18 to 25 (35.4% or 11.8 million people), followed by adults aged 26 or older (17.2% or 37.9 million people), then by adolescents aged 12 to 17 (10.5% or 2.7 million people).
- Among people aged 12 or older in 2021, 3.3% (or 9.2 million people) misused opioids (heroin or prescription pain relievers) in the past year. Among the 9.2 million people who misused opioids in the past year, 8.7 million people misused prescription pain relievers compared with 1.1 million people who used heroin. These numbers include 574,000 people who both misused prescription pain relievers and used heroin in the past year.

Sources: National Institute on Drug Abuse  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

National Institute of Mental Health

National Survey on Drug Use and Health

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