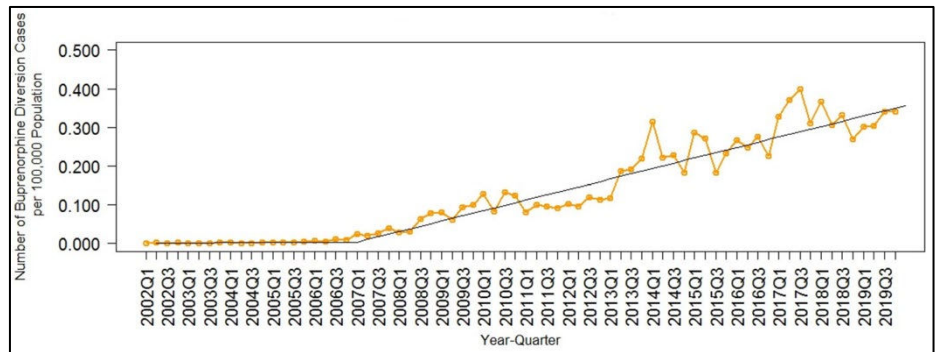


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Diversion and Non-Medical Use of Buprenorphine in the U.S.

As part of a medication assisted treatment program, buprenorphine is a partial opioid agonist medication that is approved to treat opioid use disorder (OUD). Many studies have confirmed buprenorphine’s safety and effectiveness in treating OUD. Over the past ten years, the prescribing of buprenorphine more than doubled, in part because of the ongoing opioid crisis. Buprenorphine is non-medically used and diverted – informally distributing a prescribed medication outside of a controlled setting, such as sharing, stealing, selling, etc. Research indicates that reasons for non-medical use of diverted buprenorphine include individuals who wish to use it until their preferred drug can be obtained. However, it is quite common for individuals to try and self-treat OUD with informally obtained buprenorphine.

One recent study examined buprenorphine diversion and found that nationally, diversion is increasing. Using data from a sample of law enforcement agencies in all states except Hawaii, researchers found significant and steady increases in the rate of buprenorphine diversion cases per 100,000



population (see chart). The rate in 2002 was 0 and increased to .340 by the end of 2019. This is similar to the population-based diversion rate of hydrocodone and oxycodone, two of the most diverted and non-medically used prescription opioids. The researchers also found that diversion rates were higher in the midwestern and southern regions of the country (including Florida), and lowest in the northeastern region of the country.

Non-medical use of diverted buprenorphine requires continued surveillance. But there are some harm reduction aspects related to this practice as non-medical use of buprenorphine is associated with lower risk of overdose death as some individuals may substitute it for more dangerous opioids like fentanyl. Yet, connecting people with OUD to treatment services as well as prescribed buprenorphine and ongoing monitoring and support is preferred to individuals seeking diverted medications through informal markets. Increasing buprenorphine treatment services will likely reduce diversion and non-medical use and result in better treatment outcomes for people with OUD.

Source: Buttram, M. E., Kurtz, S. P., Margolin, Z. R., & Severtson, S. G. (2021). Increasing rates of buprenorphine diversion in the United States, 2002 to 2019. *Pharmacoepidemiology and Drug Safety*, 30(11), 1514-1519.

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