

# The Point

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### Friendship and the Opioid Epidemic

Social isolation has been identified as a cause of America's opioid epidemic. Strong friendships can reduce the risk of addiction. Unfortunately, though, as a new study shows, friends aren't always helpful. Shockingly often, they're the ones who get people addicted in the first place.

A working paper released this month by the National Bureau of Economic Research examined the opioid use of American adults ages 25-34 and that of their best friends from high school.

In studies of friends' influence, untangling cause and effect is tricky. The researchers exploited the fact that people who suffer serious injuries are more likely to be prescribed opioids and to become addicted to them. They focused on people who had been seriously injured in the past year, and then on the high school best friends of those injured people.

"Having a best friend with a reported serious injury in the previous year increases the probability of own opioid misuse by around 7 percentage points in a population where 17 percent ever misuses opioids," the researchers found. They added, "the effect is driven by individuals without a college degree and those who live in the same county as their best friends." 

If friends do matter, for bad as well as for good, what can be done about it?

The authors write that targeting "selected individuals (e.g., with a large social network) may be particularly effective." OK, but figuring out who those people are and how to influence them is a huge challenge. Their second idea feels even squishier: "For example, educating juveniles about the perils of drug use might be effective." That's been tried for decades.

The authors' research is persuasive. Their solutions, less so.