Psychotropic Medication and Psychotropic Polypharmacy Among Children and Adolescents in the US Child Welfare System

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This national study found that children and adolescents involved in the child welfare system are prescribed psychotropic medications at significantly higher rates than other Medicaid-enrolled youth, with 26.25% receiving at least one medication compared to 9.06% of their peers. Psychotropic polypharmacy was also more common (13.27% vs 3.11%), with stimulants, antidepressants, and antipsychotics most frequently prescribed, reflecting high rates of trauma-related disorders and other mental health conditions among this population.

These findings raise concerns about safety, long-term effects, and the need for careful oversight, highlighting the importance of ensuring appropriate, trauma-informed mental health treatment and stronger policy guidance for prescribing practices in the child welfare system.

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