

# Shifts in black market drug transactions during the COVID-19 pandemic: analysis of crowd-sourced transaction reports

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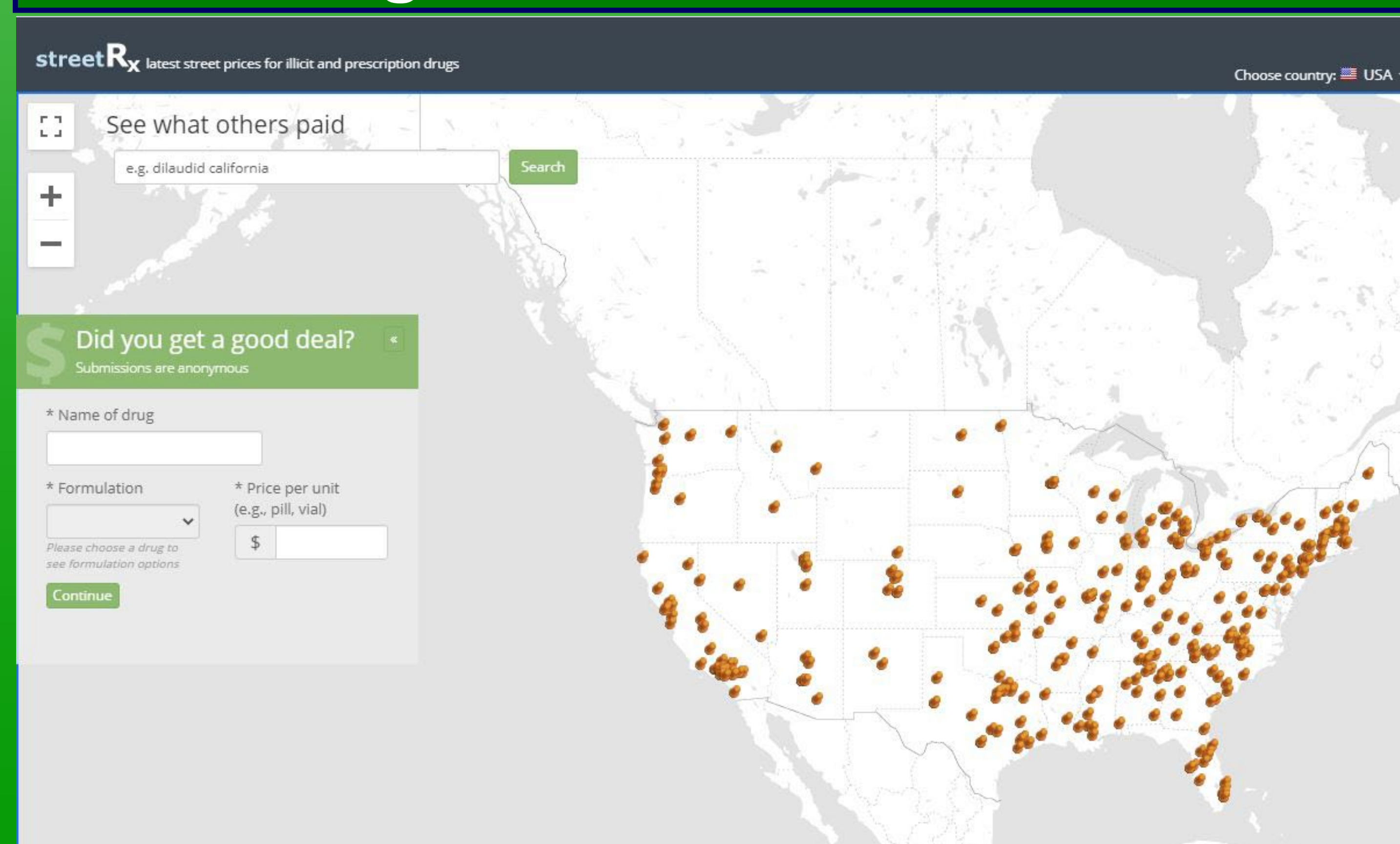
## Introduction

The COVID 19 pandemic and subsequent economic and social changes have had a documented impact on drug use in the United States. However, little is known about the changes that may have been seen in the illicit drug market. StreetRx.com obtains data concerning the black market drug economy through crowdsourcing and has been used to document changes over time in drug trade and prices. This study analyzed black market drug reporting patterns to detect changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

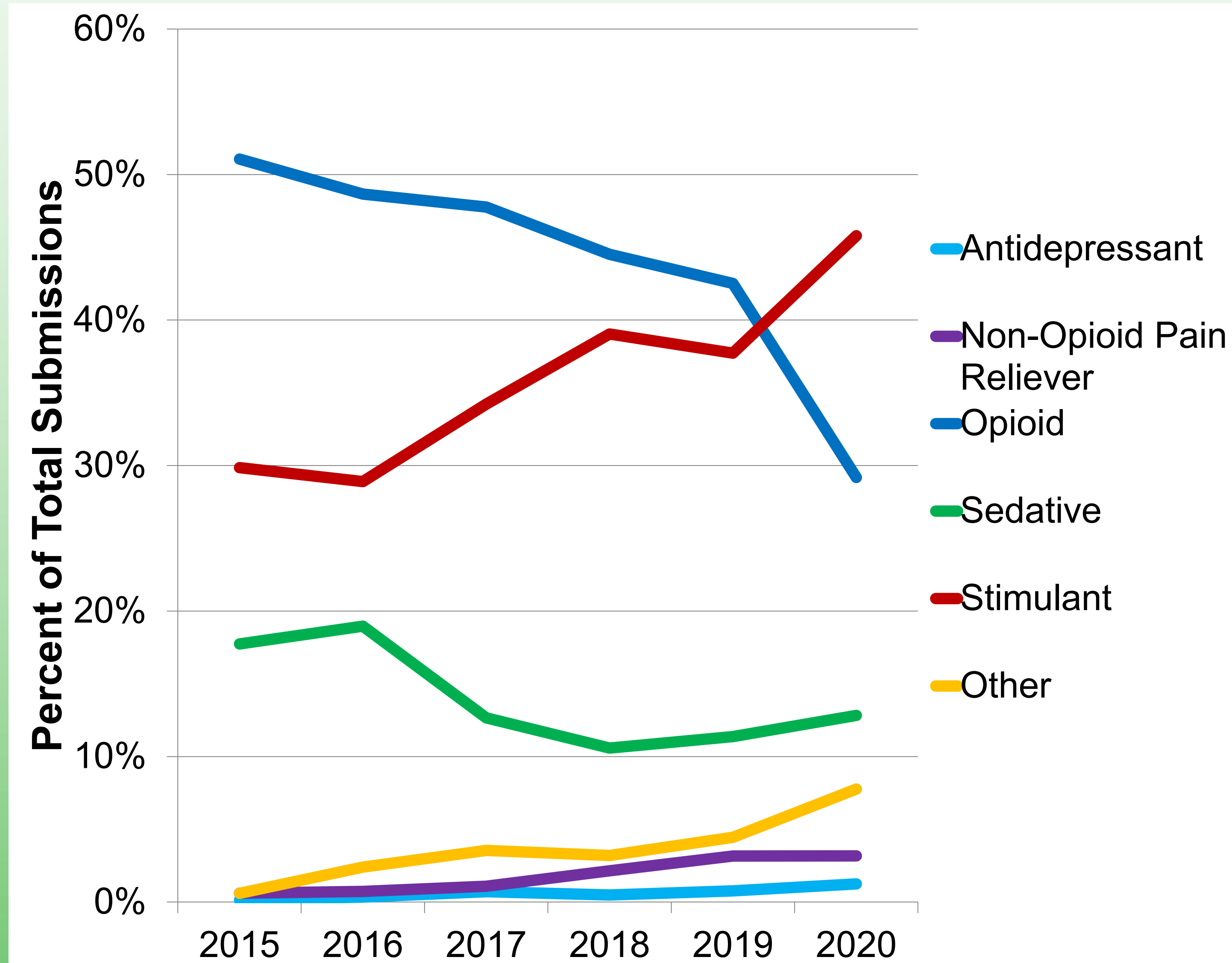
## Methods

StreetRx.com collected sale price of drug diversion transactions for prescription and illicit stimulants, sedatives, antidepressants, and pain relievers from 2015 through 2020. These reports of illicit street sales were entered by website users who had participated in or heard about the sales. Submissions from the March to June 2020 timeframe were compared to submissions in the same period in past years (March to June 2015, March to June 2016, etc.).

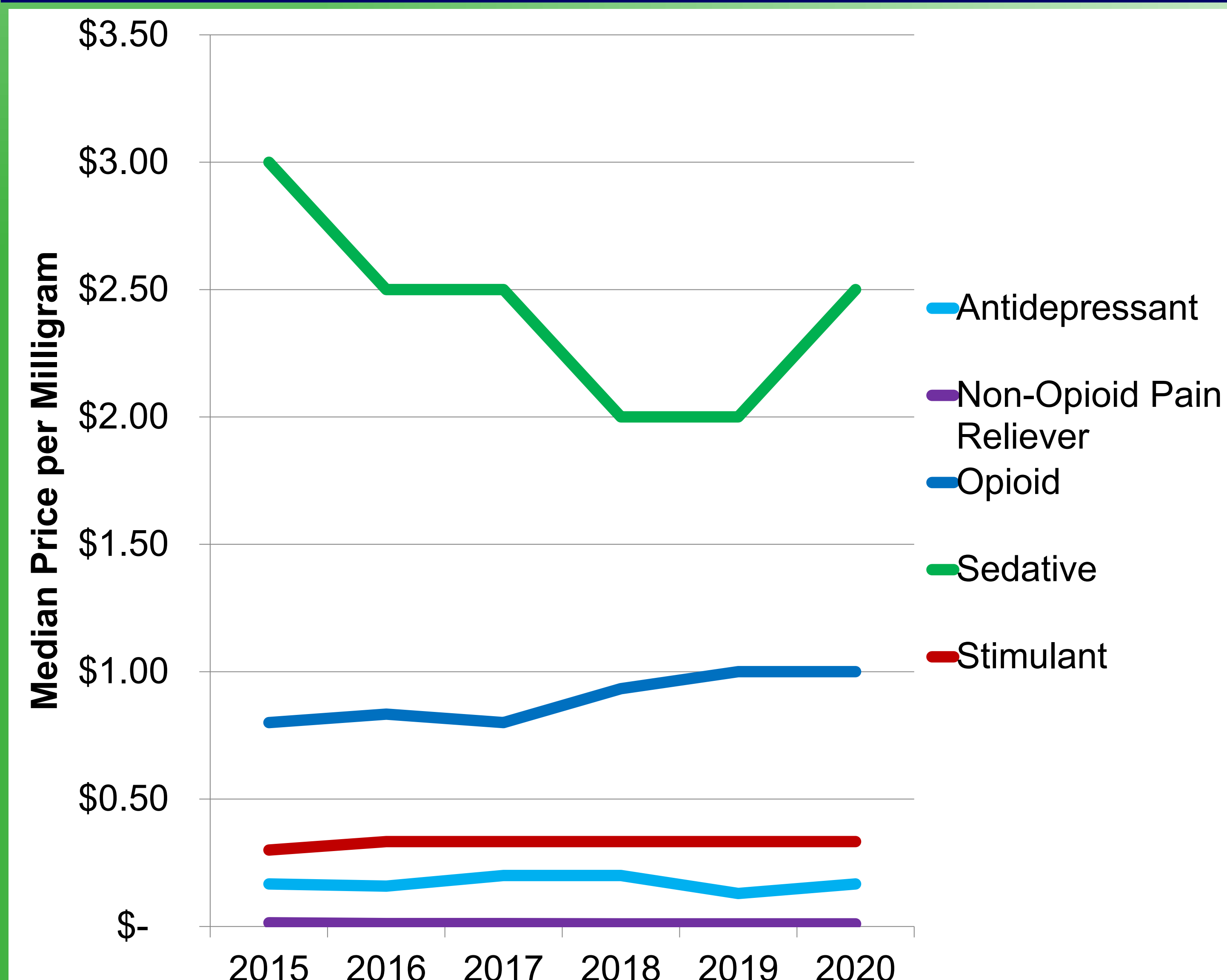
## Fig. 1: StreetRx Website



## Fig. 2: StreetRx Submissions over Time



## Fig. 3: StreetRx Price by Class over Time



## Results

- The total number of submissions collected during the 24 month, non-contiguous observation period was 114,536.
- The COVID time period demonstrated a higher proportion of stimulant submissions when compared to previous years (45.8% vs 29.9%, 28.9%, 34.2%, 39.0%, 37.7% respectively), and a lower proportion of opioid submissions (29.2% vs 51.1%, 48.7%, 47.8%, 44.5%, 42.5% respectively).
- Non-opioid pain relievers and antidepressants have increased while sedatives have decreased over time. These changes were in line with the observed trends leading up to 2020.
- Sedative prices increased during the pandemic period. No other notable changes were observed in drug price.

## Conclusions

- The results of this analysis show that there was a marked shift in the illicit market associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as captured by StreetRx. There was a decrease in opioids and increase in stimulants as a proportion of the total submissions.
- The stimulant share of submissions increased by over 7% from the previous year, and the opioid share of submissions decreased by over 12%.
- Other drug classes continued previous trajectories.

## Limitations

Illicit sales data are collected through crowdsourcing and bias could exist between illicit sales reported to the website and the universe of all illicit sales.