Predicting Heavy Drug Use

Results of a Longitudinal Study, Youth Characteristics Describing and Predicting Heavy Drug Use by Adults

FEBRUARY 2004

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY

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Executive Office of the President

Office of National Drug Control Policy

Washington, DC

20503

February 2004

Acknowledgements

This publication was sponsored by the Executive Office of the President, Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). Sam Schildhaus, Yoku Shaw-Taylor, Steven Pedlow, Michael R. Pergamit, and other staff of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago produced this publication under a contract to ONDCP, contract number 282-98-0024, Task Order number 3. June S. Sivilli served as Project Officer for this study and resulting publication.

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Office of National Drug Control Policy (2004). *Predicting Heavy Drug Use* Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President (Publication No. NCJ 208382)

Electronic Access to Publication

This document can be accessed electronically through the following World Wide Web address:
http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov

Originating Office

Executive Office of the President
Office of National Drug Control Policy
Washington, DC 20503

Publication Number NCJ 208382
Printed in January 2005

Executive Summary

Dynamic Picture of Marijuana and Cocaine Use from Age 14 to 40

- This study's main aims are to describe the movement of adolescents and young adults into and out of drug use and to predict heavy drug use. The data source is the Department of Labor's National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which began in 1979 with a sample of 12,686 adolescents aged 14–21. After 17 rounds and 19 years, the response rate in 1998 was 87 percent.

The Transient Nature of Most Marijuana and Cocaine Use

- A majority of the sample reported no drug use in the five "index" rounds (questions on drug use were asked for five years during the 15-year period between 1984 and 1998). Overall, 42 percent of individuals reported marijuana use, 19 percent reported cocaine use, and 3 percent reported crack use (crack questions were collected only between 1992 and 1998).

- Most of the persons using any drug in a given round never used the drug again or used the drug for one additional round. Overall, 19.2 percent used marijuana, 11.7 percent used cocaine, and 2.7 percent used crack in one round only.

- Very few individuals reported drug use in all five index rounds: 3.2 percent used marijuana and 0.2 percent used cocaine in every round from 1984 to 1998. For crack, 0.2 percent used in the three rounds between 1992 and 1998.

- Only 3.9 percent used marijuana and 0.6 percent used cocaine in four rounds; crack was used in two rounds by 0.6 percent.

- Almost half of marijuana users who used in *one* index round used marijuana in the next one. Only *one* of 16 non-marijuana users in one index period *used* marijuana in the subsequent period.

- About one-quarter of cocaine users who used in one index round used cocaine in the subsequent study period. Only one of 32 non-cocaine users in one index period *used* cocaine in the next one.

Early Predictors of Heavy Cocaine Use

- All other things being equal, adolescents and young adults who smoked marijuana more than 50 times at the first contact were six times more likely to become heavy cocaine users than those who did not smoke marijuana. This finding supports the suggestion that preventing adolescents and young adults from using substantial amounts of marijuana may lead to a considerable decrease in the number of future heavy cocaine users.

- Young male users were almost twice as likely as young female drug users to become heavy drug users.

- Those who had been suspended from school were one and one-half times more likely to become heavy cocaine users than those who had not been suspended from school.

- Adolescents and young adults who reported a significant amount of illegal income at round one were more than twice as likely to become heavy cocaine users as those who did not. Also, those who sold hard drugs at round one during adolescence were two times as likely to become heavy cocaine users as those who did not. Directing adolescents and young adults from criminal occupations is not only associated with lower future criminal behavior, it is likely to be associated with substantial decreases in the number of heavy cocaine users.

- Adolescents and young adults who attended religious services at least twice a month were one-third less likely to become heavy cocaine users as those who attended no religious services. Attending infrequently is associated with a one-quarter lower likelihood of becoming a heavy cocaine user. Family and community efforts to encourage religious attendance by youth may be associated with fewer heavy cocaine users in the future.

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