

# The NHSDA Report

November 23, 2001

## Substance Use Among Older Adults

### In Brief

- In 2000, an estimated 568,000 persons aged 55 or older had used illicit drugs in the past month and over 5 million were “binge” alcohol users, including more than 1 million who were heavy alcohol users
- Among older adults, whites had higher rates of past month illicit drug use compared with Hispanics and higher rates of past month alcohol use compared with either blacks or Hispanics
- The number of illicit drug users among older adults is likely to increase in the coming years due to the aging of the “baby boom” generation

The 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) enables an investigation of the use of illicit drugs and alcohol by persons aged 55 or older. The illicit drugs included in the survey were marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens (including LSD and PCP), heroin, and any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically.<sup>1</sup>

### Prevalence of Substance Use Among Older Adults

The 2000 NHSDA indicated that an estimated 568,000 adults aged 55 or older, or 1 percent of all older adults in the United States, had used illicit drugs in the past month (Table 1). The illicit drugs most commonly used by older adults were psychotherapeutics used nonmedically (an estimated 300,000 past month users) and marijuana (an estimated 221,000 past month users). Among older adults, the rate of past month illicit drug use was highest for those aged 55 to 59, and rates declined dramatically with increasing age (Figure 1).

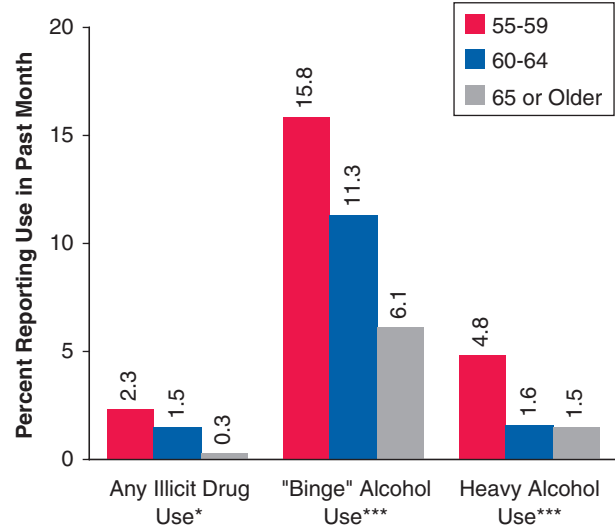
**Table 1. Percentages and Estimated Numbers (in Thousands) of Adults Aged 55 or Older Reporting Past Month Use of Illicit Drugs or Alcohol: 2000**

Substance	Percent	Estimated Number (in Thousands)
Any Illicit Drug*	1.0 [0.22]	568 [120]
Marijuana	0.4 [0.16]	221 [88]
Nonmedical Use of Any Psychotherapeutic**	0.5 [0.14]	300 [78]
Any Alcohol Use	37.5 [0.96]	20,613 [531]
“Binge” Alcohol Use***	9.4 [0.52]	5,178 [288]
Heavy Alcohol Use***	2.3 [0.27]	1,281 [147]

Note: Standard errors are given in brackets.

Note: Low precision prevented the estimation of rates for the use of cocaine, inhalants, heroin, and hallucinogens.

**Figure 1. Percentages of Adults Aged 55 or Older Reporting Past Month Use of Any Illicit Drug, “Binge” Alcohol Use, or Heavy Alcohol Use, by Age Group: 2000**



Past month use of alcohol was reported by 38 percent of older adults, with 9 percent reporting “binge” use (had five or more drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days), and 2 percent reporting heavy alcohol use (had five or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days). These percentages translate to almost 21 million past month drinkers, over 5 million binge drinkers, and more than 1 million heavy drinkers among older adults.

These data indicate that substantial numbers of older adults were past month users of illicit drugs or alcohol. However, the rates of past month illicit drug use, alcohol use, binge alcohol use, and heavy alcohol use were significantly lower for persons aged 55 or older compared with past month rates among younger age groups (Figure 2).

### Differences by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

The rate of past month illicit drug use by older adults was significantly higher among whites (1.2 percent) than among Hispanics (0.2 percent) (Table 2). The rate of past month alcohol use by older adults was also higher for whites (40 percent) compared with blacks (20 percent) or Hispanics (29 percent). However, there were no statistically significant differences between the rates of binge drinking or heavy drinking for these racial/ethnic groups.

There also was no significant gender difference in the rate of past month illicit drug use among older adults. However, the rates of past month alcohol use, binge drinking, and heavy drinking among older adults were higher for males than for females.

### Impact of the “Baby Boom” Generation

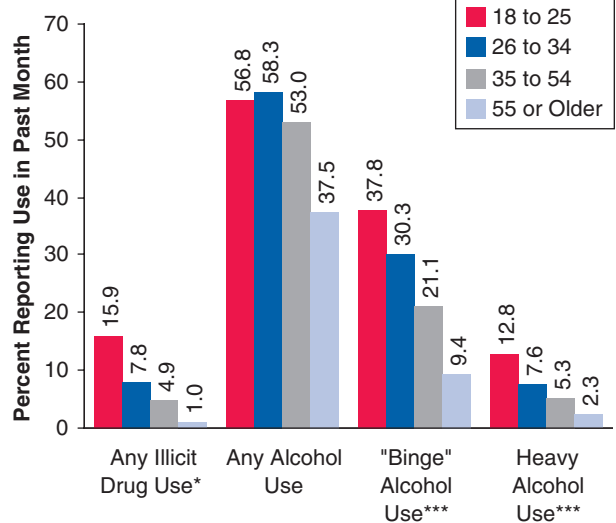
Birth cohorts that experience high rates of illicit drug use in youth or young adulthood have subsequently shown higher rates of use as they age, relative to other cohorts.<sup>2</sup> The rate of lifetime illicit drug use was significantly higher among persons aged 35 to 54 (50 percent) in 2000 (birth cohorts of the “baby boom” generation) than among older adults (13 percent).<sup>3</sup> The higher prevalence of illicit drug use among the younger age group (those aged 35 to 54), combined with the generation’s overall large population size, suggests that the number of illicit drug users among older adults will increase in the coming years as this younger group enters older adulthood.

**Table 2. Percentages of Adults Aged 55 or Older Reporting Past Month Use of Illicit Drugs or Alcohol, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender: 2000**

	Race/Ethnicity			Gender	
	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Males	Females
Any Illicit Drug*	1.2 [0.26]	0.5 [0.33]	0.2 [0.21]	1.3 [0.38]	0.8 [0.25]
Any Alcohol Use	40.4 [1.06]	20.1 [2.56]	28.5 [3.74]	46.5 [1.46]	30.0 [1.20]
"Binge" Alcohol Use***	8.9 [0.59]	11.3 [2.09]	10.9 [2.39]	14.5 [0.97]	5.2 [0.59]
Heavy Alcohol Use***	2.4 [0.30]	2.2 [0.82]	3.4 [1.48]	4.0 [0.51]	0.9 [0.23]

Note: Standard errors are given in brackets.

**Figure 2. Percentages of Adults Aged 18 or Older Reporting Past Month Use of Any Illicit Drug or Alcohol, by Age Group: 2000**



**End Notes**

1. Use was defined as nonmedical if the drug was not prescribed for the respondent or if the respondent took the drug only for the experience or feeling it caused.
2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000). *Summary of findings from the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (NHSDA Series: H-12, DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3466). Rockville, MD: Author.
3. The rate of lifetime alcohol use was also slightly higher among persons aged 35 to 54 although the differences between these age groups were smaller for alcohol use than for illicit drug use.

**Figure and Table Notes**

- \*\*"Any illicit drug" indicates use at least once of marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens (including LSD and PCP), heroin, or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically during the 30 days prior to the interview.
- \*\*Nonmedical use of any prescription-type pain reliever, tranquilizer, stimulant, or sedative; does not include over-the-counter drugs.
- \*\*\*\*"Binge" alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days. By "occasion" is meant at the same time or within a couple hours of each other. "Heavy" alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days; all heavy alcohol users are also "binge" alcohol users.

Source (all figures and tables): SAMHSA 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA).

The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The 2000 data are based on information obtained from nearly 72,000 persons aged 12 or older. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NHSDA Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Information and data for this issue are based on the following publication and statistics:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2001). *Summary of findings from the 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (NHSDA Series: H-13, DHHS Publication No. SMA 01-3549). Rockville, MD: Author.

Also available on-line:  
[www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov](http://www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov)

Additional Tables 1.3B, 1.10B, and 1.19B from [http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol\\_1\\_Part\\_1/V1P1.htm](http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol_1_Part_1/V1P1.htm) and 2.3B, 2.10B, and 2.24B from [http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol\\_1\\_Part\\_2/V1P2.htm](http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol_1_Part_2/V1P2.htm)

Additional tables available on request.