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NIDA-Sponsored Survey Shows Decrease in Illicit Drug Use among Nation's Teens but Prescription Drug Abuse Remains High

Study Shows 23.2 Percent Decline in Illicit Drug Use over Five-Year Period, Led by Decrease in Marijuana Use

The 2006 Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey of eighth, 10th and 12th graders indicates that their past-month use of illicit drugs has dropped 23.2 percent since 2001 (from 19.4 percent in 2001 to 14.9 percent in 2006). By contrast, abuse of prescription opioids remains at unacceptably high levels. The study is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The survey showed that past-month marijuana use for all three grades combined declined significantly from 2005 to 2006. Further, since 2001, past-month use of marijuana for all three grades combined decreased by almost 25 percent (from 16.6 percent in 2001 to 12.5 percent in 2006). There was also good news about teen smoking as well as alcohol consumption. Cigarette smoking is at an all-time low for all three grades, and past-month alcohol use continued to trend downward.

However, of significant concern is the finding that past-year use of Vicodin remained high among all three grades, with nearly one in ten high school seniors using it in the past year. Despite a drop from 2005 to 2006 in past-year abuse of OxyContin among 12th graders (from 5.5 percent to 4.3 percent), there has been no such decline among the eighth and 10th grade students, and the rate of use among the youngest students has increased significantly since it was included in the survey in 2002. There is also concern about non-medical use of over-the-counter drugs. In the first national survey on non-medical use of cold or cough medicine, the data show that 4.2 percent of eighth graders, 5.3 percent of 10th graders, and 6.9 percent of 12th graders reported taking cold or cough medicines with dextromethorphan (DXM) during the past year to get high. Dextromethorphan is a cough suppressant found in many over-the-

counter cough and cold remedies, and is generally safe when taken in recommended doses but in large amounts can cause dangerous side effects.

"We should all take pride in seeing a drop in the percentage of teenagers who abuse drugs, a key goal in the President's National Drug Control Strategy," said HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt. "But we must not ease up, as there is more to be done. We must seize the opportunity to build on this success by renewing our commitment to help young people avoid drug use, or to stop using drugs if they have started."

"The survey results indicate that the messages we are sending to students about addiction and drug abuse are having an overall positive effect," said NIH Director Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni. "But the rise in prescription drug abuse among the younger grades and the intentional abuse of over-the-counter medications are very disturbing. These findings point to the continuing need to educate our young people about the potential for harm when drugs are taken without a physician's supervision."

"Past-year use of marijuana has fallen by 36 percent among eighth graders, 28 percent among 10th graders, and 18 percent among 12th graders since the peak abuse years in the 1990s," says NIDA Director Dr. Nora D. Volkow. "This is great news. However, past-year use of OxyContin has almost doubled among eighth graders since 2002, and Vicodin abuse remains stubbornly high among 12th graders. We know that the job is not yet done."

Other findings from the survey show that between 2005 and 2006:

- Past-year and past-month methamphetamine use decreased among 10th graders, with past-year falling from 2.9 percent to 1.8 percent, and past-month decreasing from 1.1 percent to 0.7 percent;
- There was an increase in perceived harmfulness among 12th graders of heroin, ice, sedatives/barbiturates, and steroids;
- There was a decrease in perceived harmfulness and disapproval of MDMA (or ecstasy) among eighth graders; and
- Use of inhalants leveled off in 2006.

"There has been a substance abuse sea change among American teens," said John P. Walters, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. "They are getting the message that dangerous drugs damage their lives and limit their futures. We know that if people don't start using drugs during their teen years, they are very unlikely to go on to develop drug problems later in life. That's why this sharp decline in teen drug use is such important news: It means that there will be less addiction, less suffering, less crime, lower health costs, and higher achievement for this upcoming generation of Americans."

Since 1975, the MTF survey has measured drug, alcohol, and cigarette use and related attitudes among adolescent students nationwide. Survey participants report their drug use behaviors across three time periods: lifetime, past-year, and past-month. Overall, 48,460 students from 410 public and private schools in the eighth, 10th, and 12th grades participated in this year's survey. The survey has been conducted since its inception by investigators at the University of Michigan.



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MTF is one of three major HHS-sponsored surveys that provide data on substance use among youth. Its Web site is <http://monitoringthefuture.org>. More information on MTF can be found at <http://www.hhs.gov/news>; or <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov>. Additional details are also available at <http://www.drugabuse.gov/DrugPages/MTF.html>.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), sponsored by HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is the primary source of statistical information on illicit drug use in the U.S. population 12 years of age and older. Formerly known as the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, the survey collects data in household interviews, currently using computer-assisted self-administration for drug-related items. More information is available at <http://www.drugabusestatistics.samhsa.gov>.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), part of HHS' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, is a school-based survey that collects data from students in grades 9–12. The survey includes questions on a wide variety of health-related risk behaviors, not simply drug abuse. More information is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/yrbs/index.htm>.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse is a component of the National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIDA supports most of the world's research on the health aspects of drug abuse and addiction. The Institute carries out a large variety of programs to ensure the rapid dissemination of research information and its implementation in policy and practice. Fact sheets on the health effects of drugs of abuse and information on NIDA research and other activities can be found on the NIDA home page at www.drugabuse.gov.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH)—The Nation's Medical Research Agency—includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is the primary Federal agency for conducting and supporting basic, clinical and translational medical research, and it investigates the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov.

