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NIDA Survey Shows a Decline in Smoking and Illicit Drug Use Among Eighth Graders

Prescription Drug Abuse Still High For 12th Graders

The nation's eighth graders took center stage in this year's Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey, showing a significant decline in both smoking and illicit drug use in the past year, part of a downward trend for all measured age groups in the last decade. In addition, eighth graders showed a substantial long-term decline in past-year alcohol use, down to 31.8 percent from its recent peak of 46.8 percent in 1994. The Monitoring the Future project—now in its 33rd year—is a series of independent surveys of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan under a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Results from the 2007 survey were announced today at a news conference at the White House.

The 2007 results appear to reflect an ongoing cultural shift among teens and their attitudes about smoking and substance abuse. Lifetime, past-month, and daily smoking among eighth graders has dropped considerably in the past year, and daily cigarette smoking among eighth graders dropped from 4 percent to 3 percent; down from its 10.4 percent peak in 1996. Similarly, annual prevalence of marijuana use by eighth graders fell from 11.7 percent in 2006 to 10.3 percent in 2007, and is down from its 1996 peak of 18.3 percent.

“Over the last decade, there has been a large science-based effort throughout the public health community to drive down the rates of smoking, illicit drug, and alcohol use among teens,” said NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni, M.D. “These results show us we are definitely seeing a decline in substance abuse among our youngest and most vulnerable teens, and we are committed to continuing our efforts.”

“We are especially heartened to see the decrease in smoking among eighth graders, and will be watching the next two years closely to see if this decline will stick as these kids get older,” said NIDA director Nora D. Volkow. “If this change in attitude is carried with them throughout the rest of their teen years, we could see a dramatic drop in smoking-related deaths in their generation.”

The survey also showed that while past-year use of marijuana declined among 8th graders in 2007, it remained steady among 10th and 12th graders. However, in the past decade, there has been a slow downward trend in overall illicit drug use driven by gradual declines in marijuana smoking. Past-year marijuana use among 10th graders sits at 24.6 percent after it peaked in 1997 at 34.8 percent. Similarly, past-year marijuana use among 12th graders registers at 31.7 percent after a 1997 peak of 38.5 percent.

The survey results are not without concerns, however. Prescription drug abuse remains high with virtually no significant drop in nonmedical use of most individual prescription drugs. Vicodin remains one of the most commonly abused drugs among 12th graders: 1 in 10 reported nonmedical use in the past year. The Monitoring the Future Survey traditionally measures misuse of a variety of different prescription drugs including opiates like Vicodin and OxyContin, amphetamines (including Ritalin), sedatives/barbiturates, and tranquilizers, as well as over-the-counter drugs, such as cough syrup. However, for the first time this year, researchers pulled together data for all prescription drugs as a measurable group, and 15.4 percent of high school seniors reported nonmedical use of at least one of these prescription medications within the past year. Recent data for consuming 5+ drinks in a row in the last two weeks--an especially dangerous pattern of consumption--have remained steady at worrisome levels for all three grades. In addition, recent data for drinking have remained steady at high levels, particularly for 10th and 12th graders.

Another concern in the survey is the softening of attitudes towards MDMA (ecstasy) and LSD in the younger grades. For the third year in a row, there was a decrease in perceived harmfulness of MDMA among eighth graders. Among 10th graders, there was a decrease in perceived harmfulness of LSD and MDMA and a decrease in disapproval of LSD. Concurrently, there has been an increase in past-year MDMA use in 10th and 12th graders over the past two years.

“We will be watching what happens with MDMA and LSD use in future surveys,” said Dr. Volkow. “This decrease in both disapproval and perceived harmfulness among eighth graders shows us that we need to be vigilant in our educational efforts with every drug in each succeeding generation.”

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, 48,025 students from 403 public and private schools in the 8th, 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. Additional information on the Monitoring the Future Survey, as well as comments from Dr. Nora Volkow can be found at <http://www.drugabuse.gov/Drugpages/MTF.html>

MTF is one of three major Health and Human Services (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. 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, including drug abuse. More information is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/yrebs/index.htm>.

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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 inform policy and improve 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.
