

# The NHSDA Report

January 24, 2003

## Characteristics of New Marijuana Users

### In Brief

- In 2000, 2.4 million persons used marijuana for the first time
- In 1998 and 1999, more than a quarter of marijuana initiates were 14 or younger. The average age was 17
- Almost 60 percent of recent marijuana initiates in 1998 and 1999 had used both cigarettes and alcohol prior to using marijuana

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug, and it is usually the first drug used by persons who use illicit drugs.<sup>1</sup> The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) asks respondents aged 12 or older questions about their use of marijuana or hashish and other illicit and licit substances. For each substance ever used, respondents are asked when they first used the substance. These data are used to study patterns and trends in drug initiation, or first time use.

### Trends in Marijuana Initiation

The number of annual marijuana initiates increased from 1.5 million in 1991 to around 2.5 million from 1996 (Figure 1). There has been no significant change in the number since 1996. An estimated 2.4 million persons used marijuana for the first time in 2000, the most recent estimate available.

## Demographic Characteristics of Recent Marijuana Initiates

A study of recent marijuana initiates (persons who used marijuana for the first time in 1998 or 1999) found that 51 percent were male and more than a quarter were age 14 or younger. The average age of marijuana initiates was 17 years. (Figure 2)

## Seasonality of Marijuana Initiation

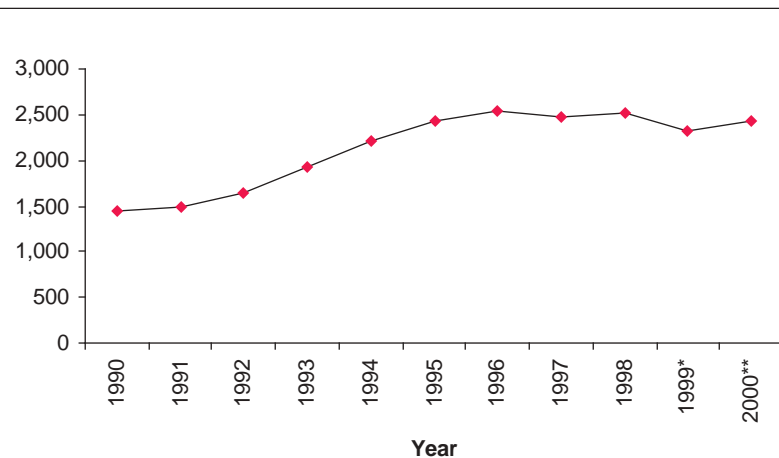
In 1998 and 1999, the estimated number of males who were marijuana initiates peaked at over 4,000 per day in June and July (Figure 3). Among females, peaks occurred in January (over 3,500) and July (over 3,600).

## Prior Cigarette or Alcohol Use by Recent Marijuana Initiates

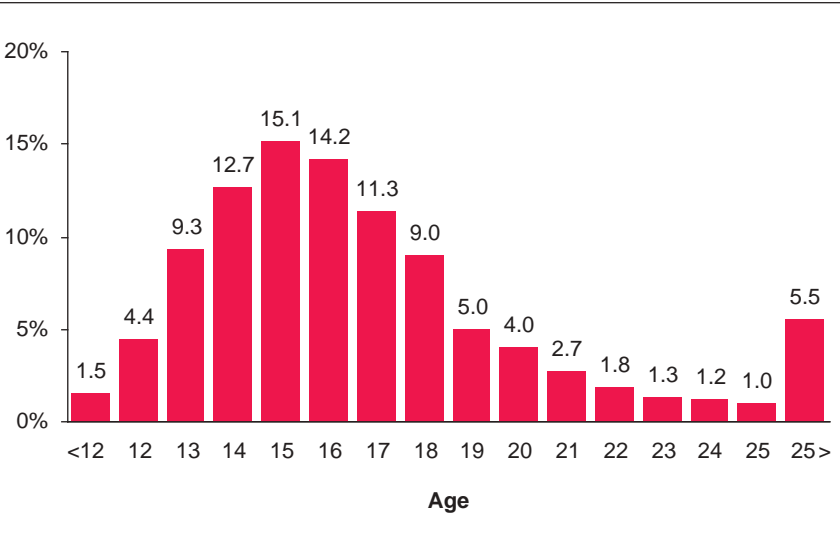
Almost 60 percent of marijuana initiates in 1998 and 1999 had used both cigarettes and alcohol prior to using marijuana (Figure 4).<sup>2</sup> Almost 17 percent of recent marijuana initiates had used alcohol but not cigarettes prior to their marijuana use, and 15 percent used cigarettes but not alcohol. Approximately 9 percent of recent initiates had used neither cigarettes nor alcohol prior to their marijuana use.

Recent marijuana initiates who used marijuana for the first time before the age of 15 were more likely to have used marijuana before using cigarettes or alcohol (17 percent) than those who had tried marijuana for the first time at the age of 15 or older (15 to 17 years old, 9 percent; 18 to 20 years old, 4 percent; 21 or older, 1 percent).

**Figure 1. Estimated Numbers (in Thousands) of Persons Who First Used Marijuana During the Years 1990 to 2000**



**Figure 2. Percentages of Recent Marijuana Initiates By Age of First Marijuana Use**

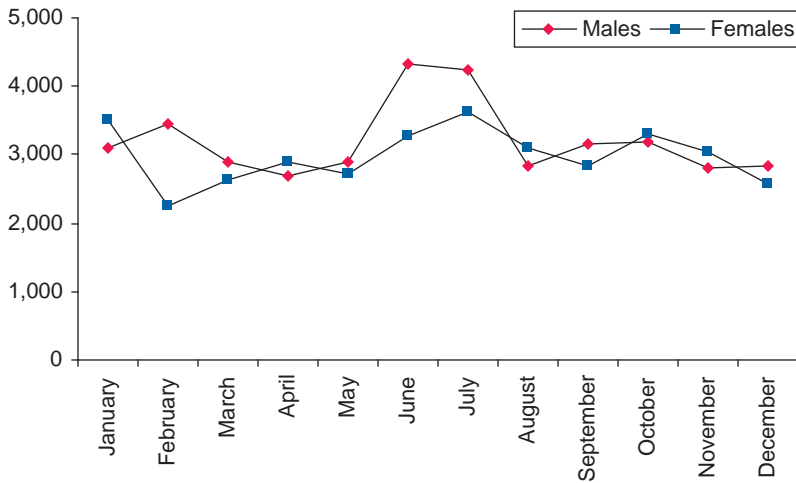


### End Notes

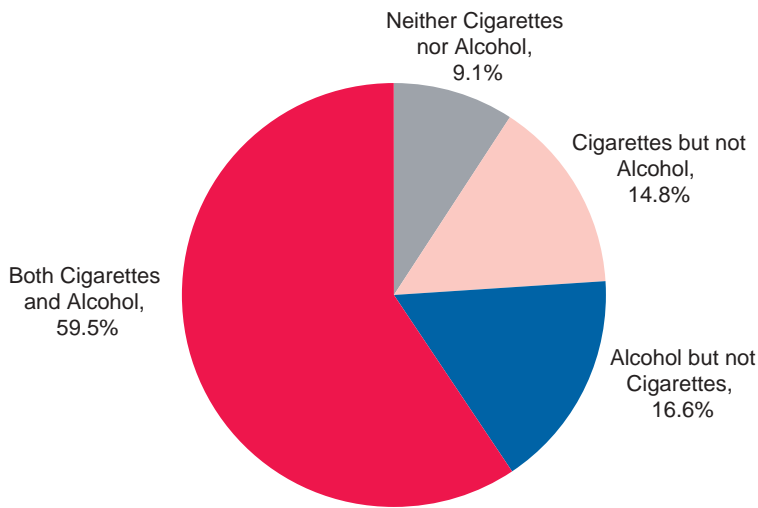
- Gfroerer, J.C., Wu, L.-T. & Penne, M.A. (2002). *Initiation of marijuana use: Trends, patterns, and implications* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 02-3711, Analytic Series A-17). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies.
- It is important to note that not all persons who had used cigarettes and alcohol in their lifetime

had also initiated marijuana use. According to NHSDA data, in 1998 and 1999, 62 percent of persons who had used both alcohol and cigarettes in their lifetime had not initiated marijuana use.

**Figure 3. Estimated Average Number of Males and Females Who Were Recent Marijuana Initiates Per Day for Each Month**



**Figure 4. Percentages of Recent Marijuana Initiates Reporting Cigarette or Alcohol Use Prior to Marijuana Initiation**



The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The 1999, 2000, and 2001 data are based on information obtained from approximately 70,000 persons aged 12 or older per year. 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 publications and statistics:

Gfroerer, J.C., Wu, L.-T., & Penne, M.A. (2002). *Initiation of marijuana use: Trends, patterns, and implications* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 02-3711, Analytic Series A-17). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies.

Office of Applied Studies. (2002). *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I. Summary of national findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 02-3758, NHSDA Series H-17). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Office of Applied Studies. (2001). *Summary of findings from the 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 01-3549, NHSDA Series H-13). Rockville, MD: Author.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000). *Summary of findings from the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3466, NHSDA Series H-12). Rockville, MD: Author.

Also available on-line:

<http://www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov>

Additional tables available upon request.

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Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration  
Office of Applied Studies  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)



**Figure Notes**

\* Estimated using 2000 and 2001 data only.

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Note: Recent initiates are persons who used marijuana for the first time in 1998 or 1999.

Note: Estimates are based on respondents who gave a substantive response to the month of first use question; hence, only those current age and age of first using

marijuana is less than 2 years. The average number of initiates per day was calculated by applying the percentage distribution of the month of first marijuana use among persons aged 12 or older to the estimated number of initiates in 1998 and 1999 and adjusting for the number of days in each month.

Source: (Figure 1) SAMHSA 1999–2001 NHSDAs.

Source: (all remaining figures) SAMHSA 1999–2000 NHSDAs.