

## Commentary

September 20, 2010

### *National Rates of Drug Use Rise Sharply: Implications for US Drug Policy*

The nation's drug abuse scorecard, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), shows a disturbing new trend in drug use by persons aged 12 and older in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In 2009, an estimated 21.8 million Americans were past month or "current" illegal drug users, representing 8.7% of the population. This is a 9% increase since 2008 when 20 million people, or 8% of the population, reported current illegal drug use.

This single year increase in current illegal use of any drug is closely tied to changes in marijuana use, the most commonly used illegal drug in the United States. An estimated 16.7 million people, or 6.6% of the population were current marijuana users in 2009, about 10% more than the number of people who reported current use in 2008 (15.2 million or 6.1%) and 16% more than in 2007 (14.4 million or 5.8%). These data clearly demonstrate that marijuana use is on the rise.

The nonmedical use of prescription drugs remains of great concern, as current use increased 13% from 6.2 million (2.5%) in 2008 to 7 million (2.8%) in 2009. However, the 2009 figures are virtually identical to the 2007 figures (6.9 million, 2.8%) of current users, suggesting that in this three year period the rate of nonmedical use of prescription drugs was roughly unchanged.

The number of current stimulant users increased 44% from 904,000 (0.4%) to 1.3 million (0.5%); this was in large part due to a nearly 60% increase in the number of methamphetamine users, rising from 314,000 (0.1%) to 502,000 (0.2%). Not surprisingly the number of first-time methamphetamine users also increased 62%, from 95,000 in 2008 to 154,000 in 2009.

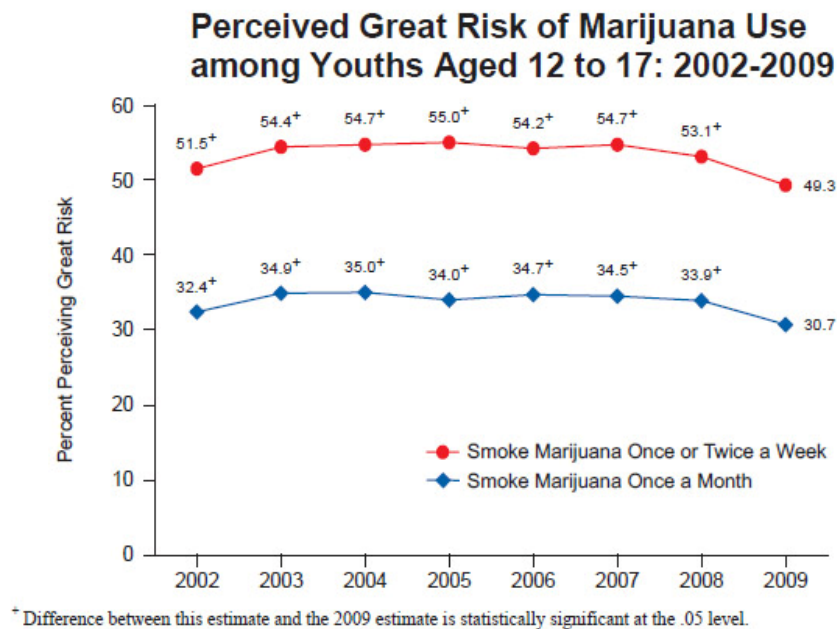
Also of great concern is a 37% increase seen in the number of Ecstasy users, increasing from 555,000 (0.2%) in 2008 to 760,000 (0.3%) in 2009. Along with an increase in overall Ecstasy use was a 23% increase in Ecstasy initiates from 894,000 in 2008 to 1.1 million in 2009. In contrast, there was a 16% decline in the percentage of Americans using cocaine since 2008 and 33% decline between 2006 and 2009.

#### **Why are the implications of these findings for current and future US drug policy?**

This significant increase in marijuana use is the result of well-funded and increasingly successful efforts to minimize the serious public health threat of the use of marijuana and other illegal drugs. Currently, 14 states and the District of Columbia have legalized "medical marijuana" and California will be voting this coming November on the highly-publicized Regulate, Control and Tax Cannabis Act of 2010, also known as Proposition 19, to legalize the use of marijuana. Marijuana remains an illegal Schedule I drug under federal US law despite efforts to change its status at the state level. The recent efforts to change policy have generated the expected shift in

attitudes toward use of marijuana and other drugs. If the level of marijuana use in the US is to be reduced, these attitudes must be turned around.

As expected, attitudes and perception of risk toward drugs continue to play a large role in rates of use. This is particularly true for youths ages 12 to 17. Only 1.3% of youth who perceived great risk of smoking marijuana once a month reported current use while 10.1% of youth who perceived moderate, slight or no risk reported current use. The following figure from the 2009 survey reporting a trend downward in youth perceived risk of marijuana use corresponds inversely to the increase in reported use of marijuana.



Closely linked to drug use is the perceived availability of a drug. Of youth aged 12 to 17, 49.9% reported that it is fairly easy or very easy to obtain marijuana. The perceived availability of marijuana did not change in the last two years. Current reported marijuana use among this young population increased from 6.7% in 2008 to 7.3% in 2009, just as illegal drug use among this population increased from 9.3% to 10%. Perhaps most importantly, the average age of marijuana initiates among persons aged 12 to 49 is decreasing. While in 2008 the average age was 17.8 years, in 2009 the average age of marijuana initiates decreased to 17.0 years. There is great cause for alarm because delay of first drug use significantly reduces the risk of addiction.

With increased use of a drug comes increased need for treatment. As marijuana use increased from 2008 to 2009 the number of individuals receiving treatment in the prior year for marijuana use increased from 947,000 to more than 1.2 million people. This is a 27% increase in the number of Americans in treatment for marijuana use.

As the 2009 NSDUH data show, 60.5% of all Americans suffering from substance abuse or dependence report marijuana as their primary drug of abuse. That is more than all of the other illegal drugs put together, including heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine. Marijuana legalization would lead to decreased perception of risk of use, increased availability, and increased marijuana use. Greater marijuana use will lead to greater need for substance abuse

treatment and a host of other costs including more marijuana-caused highway crashes and deaths. The costs of increased marijuana treatment dwarf any possible benefits from the tax revenue that might be gained from the sale of legal marijuana. Legalization is not only poor public health policy but it is also poor fiscal policy.

States are continuing to pass laws that are in direct violation of federal drug laws without interference from the federal government. However, the 2010 National Drug Control Strategy, released by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) makes clear that the Obama administration is opposed to marijuana legalization.<sup>ii</sup> In its Strategy, ONDCP lays out a national plan to decrease the US demand for illegal drugs in conjunction with improved treatment not only for marijuana dependence and abuse but also other drugs of abuse including nonmedical use of prescription drugs.

As the Associated Press reports, ONDCP Director R. Gil Kerlikowske attributed the recent rise in methamphetamine use to two changes: 1) individuals skirting the recent 2006 law which put pseudoephedrine tablets (the main ingredient in methamphetamine) behind pharmacy counters; and, 2) larger quantities of methamphetamine crossing the US-Mexico border.<sup>iii</sup>

The increase in Ecstasy use also poses great concern. Director Kerlikowske recognized that recently there has been less attention given to reducing this drug of abuse,<sup>iv</sup> despite the fact that the 2010 National Strategy identified Ecstasy as a drug that is heavily trafficked through the US-Canadian border, resulting in a 594% increase in the amount seized from 2004 to 2009.<sup>v</sup>

With efforts to legalize marijuana well underway in 2010, it is all but certain that the NSDUH data collected during this current calendar year will show continued increases in illegal drug use, particularly increases in marijuana use. The large majority of Americans who reject illegal drug use have been silent in the national drug policy debate over medical marijuana and the closely linked efforts to legalize marijuana use. The sharply rising levels of drug use reported in this landmark annual study are a call to action that will mobilize millions of Americans now on the sidelines to join together in a new bipartisan commitment to label the use of marijuana and other drugs of abuse not only as illegal but also as dangerous, unhealthy and unacceptable. Prevention of the use of illegal drugs is a goal that must be reinforced annually.

A dramatic mobilization of the American public in the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's led to a sharp decrease in the percentage of Americans 12 and older who were current users of illegal drugs, including marijuana, from 14.1% in 1979 to a modern low point of 5.8% in 1992.<sup>vi</sup> Just as the rising rate of illegal drug use in the 1970's led to successful efforts to turn the upward trend around, so we predict that the current upward trend in rates of use will spark a renewed commitment to reduce illegal drug use.

For more information on powerful new ideas to improve drug policy, visit [www.ibhinc.org](http://www.ibhinc.org).

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<sup>i</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2010). *Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Volume I. Summary of National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-38A, HHS Publication No. SMA 10-4586Findings). Rockville, MD.

<sup>ii</sup> Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2010). National drug control strategy, 2010. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved September 16, 2010 from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/policy/ndcs10/ndcs2010.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Hananel, S. (2010, Sept. 16). Report: Illegal drug use up sharply last year. *Associated Press*. Retrieved September 16, 2010 from

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jTk5T17CTJnewt3AsnnhDh7RFRuAD9I8O58G0>

<sup>iv</sup> Hananel, S. (2010, Sept. 16). Report: Illegal drug use up sharply last year. *Associated Press*. Retrieved September 16, 2010 from

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jTk5T17CTJnewt3AsnnhDh7RFRuAD9I8O58G0>

<sup>v</sup> Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2010). National drug control strategy, 2010. Washington, DC: Author.

Retrieved September 16, 2010 from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/policy/ndcs10/ndcs2010.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1999). *1997 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse*. (Office of Applied Studies). Rockville, MD. Retrieved September 17, 2010 from

<http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nhsda/nhsda97/toc.htm>