

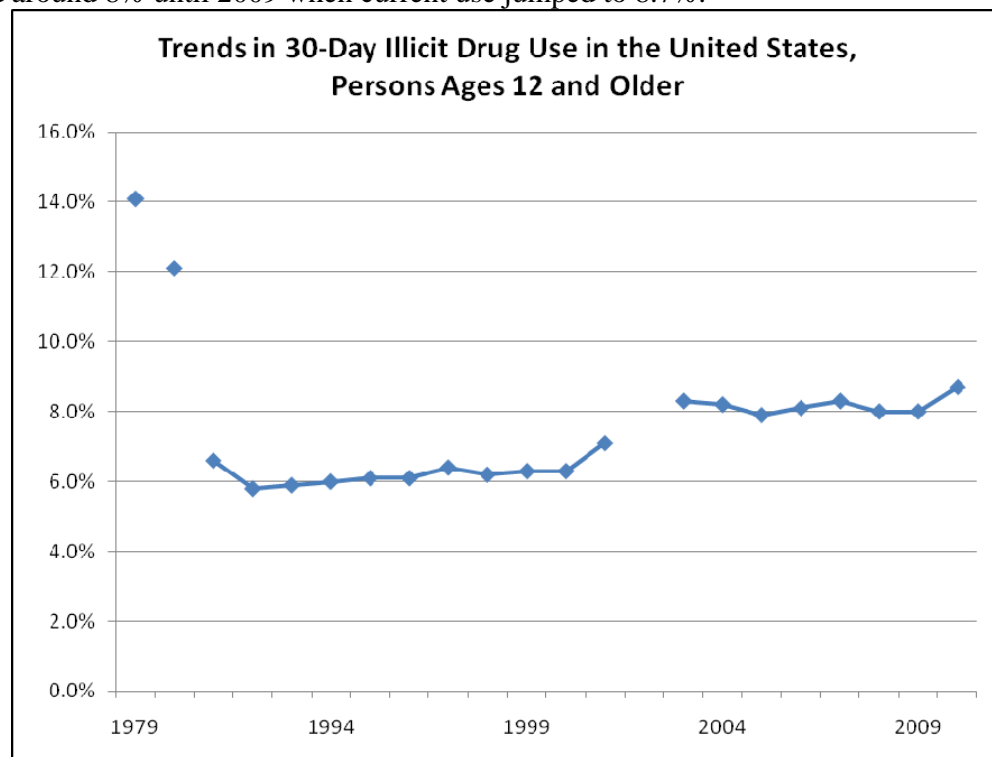
## Commentary

December 7, 2010

### *Learning from Experience: Implications of Long-term Trends in Illegal Drug Use in the United States*

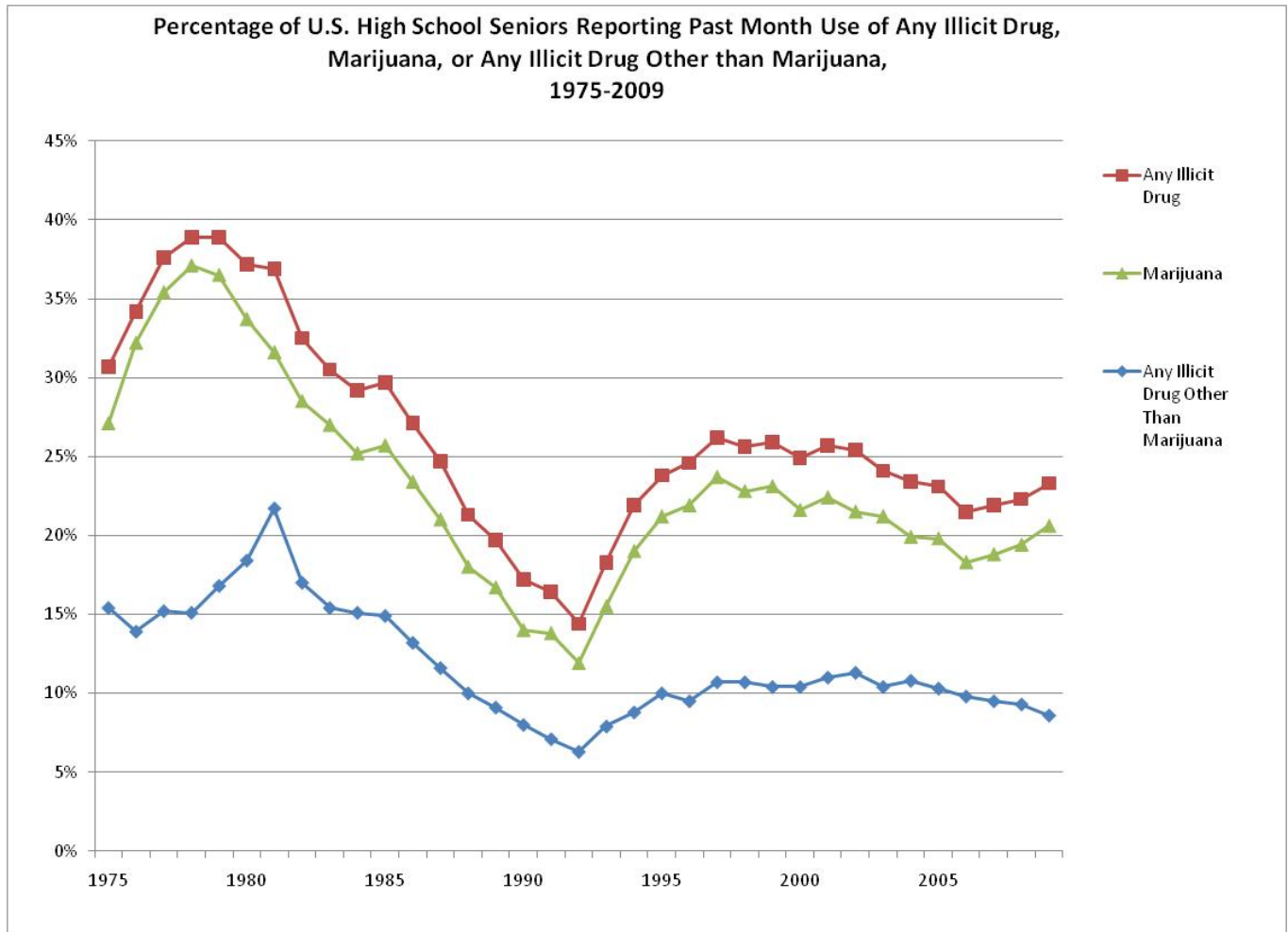
Prior to the past 40 years never before in world history has any entire population been exposed to a virtually limitless variety of dependence-producing drugs in high potency by intensely rewarding routes of administration, particularly snorting, smoking and shooting. The United States has met this serious public policy challenge with a strong bipartisan investment in a strategy that balances law enforcement with treatment, prevention and research. The impact of this balanced strategy can be seen in the dramatic changes in rates of illegal drug use in the US over the past four decades. These trends also reflect significant changes in public attitudes towards illegal drug use over this extended period of time.

Illegal drug use dramatically increased in the US from the early 1970's, reaching a historic peak in 1979 when 14.1% of all Americans age 12 and older used an illegal drug in the past 30 days, termed "current use."<sup>1</sup> From 1979 to the early 1990's, the rate of current illegal drug use dramatically decreased nearly 60% to its lowest point of 5.8% in 1992.<sup>2</sup> Since 1992, illegal drug use remained fairly stable through 2000. From 2000 to 2002, the number of current illegal drug users increased 31%.<sup>3</sup> Since that time, illegal drug use rates have hovered around 8% until 2009 when current use jumped to 8.7%.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The survey methods for NSDUH changed in 2002.

These dramatic changes in illegal drug use are more apparent in youth illegal drug use rates. The youth drug use rates are more dynamic and responsive to changes in the national culture. The graph below displays data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse's (NIDA) *Monitoring the Future* survey and shows the sharp changes in drug use among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Rates of marijuana use closely track the trends in illegal drug use because marijuana has been the most widely used illegal drug among youth over this extended period of time.<sup>5</sup>



### What influenced these marked changes in illegal drug use?

#### *Increase in drug use from the early 1973 to 1979:*

During this time the growing belief that illegal drug use was trivial led to the rapidly rising levels of marijuana use and rapidly rising support for decriminalization of marijuana. Between 1973 and 1978, eleven states decriminalized possession of small amounts of marijuana. There was a national sense that marijuana use inevitably would be decriminalized or even legalized which contributed greatly to increases in illegal drug use up to the peak in 1979.

#### *Long decline in drug use from 1980 to 1992:*

The Parents' Movement which began in 1978 focused on the negative health effects of marijuana use, the use of marijuana by youth as a "gateway" to other illegal drug use, and on the powerful protective role

of engaged parents who insisted their children not use illegal drugs including marijuana. During the 1980's Nancy Reagan embraced the message of the Parents' Movement, chairing the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth and later supporting the "Just Say No" campaign. This effective effort to de-normalize illegal drug use – particularly, but not only, marijuana use – received strong White House support through the early 1990's.

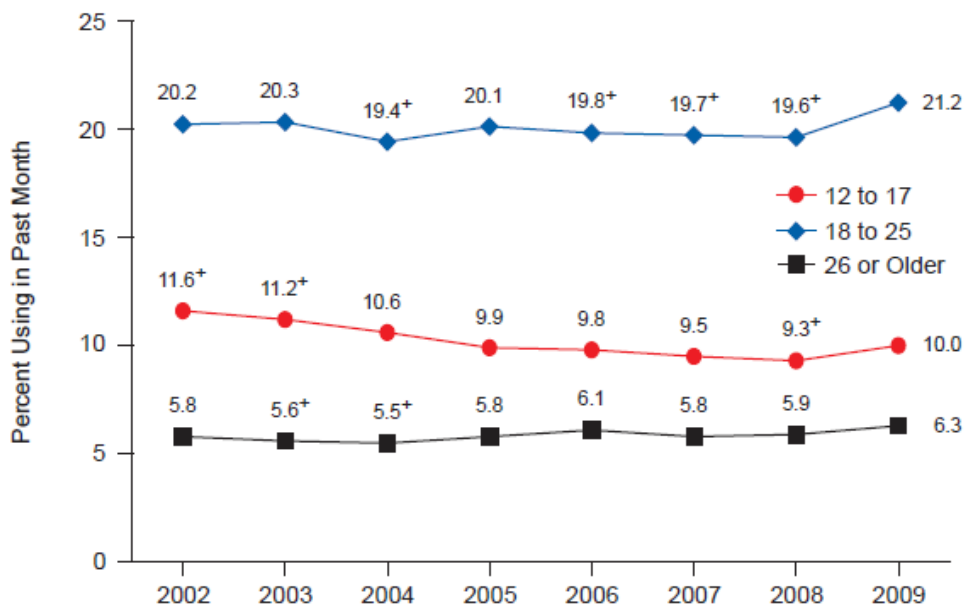
***Renewed increase in illegal drug use from 1993 to 1997:***

The significant increase in illegal drug use by youth through the late 1990's sharply reversed the downward trend in the prior 14 years. This change reflected the gradual rise in toleration in the US of illegal drug use and the disappearance of the Parents' Movement over those years. A new movement that called for "Harm Reduction," which espoused the view that marijuana use itself did not cause harm, was aggressively promoted. The Harm Reductionists claimed that the criminal justice system created most of the "harm" from illegal drug use. This cultural shift, which was well-funded and sophisticated, focused on the promotion of "medical marijuana" as not only compassionate but also as a way to gain legitimacy for marijuana use. During this time California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana through the passage of Proposition 215, the Compassionate Use Act of 1996.

***The unstable plateau for all ages and decreases in youth drug use from 1998 to 2008:***

The administration of President Clinton led a renewed federal counterattack against toleration of illegal drug use which was continued with vigor during the term of President George W. Bush. During this period there was a virtual stalemate between the forces of drug toleration and the rejection of illegal drug use, especially marijuana use. This stalemate was reflected in the plateau of drug use over these years.

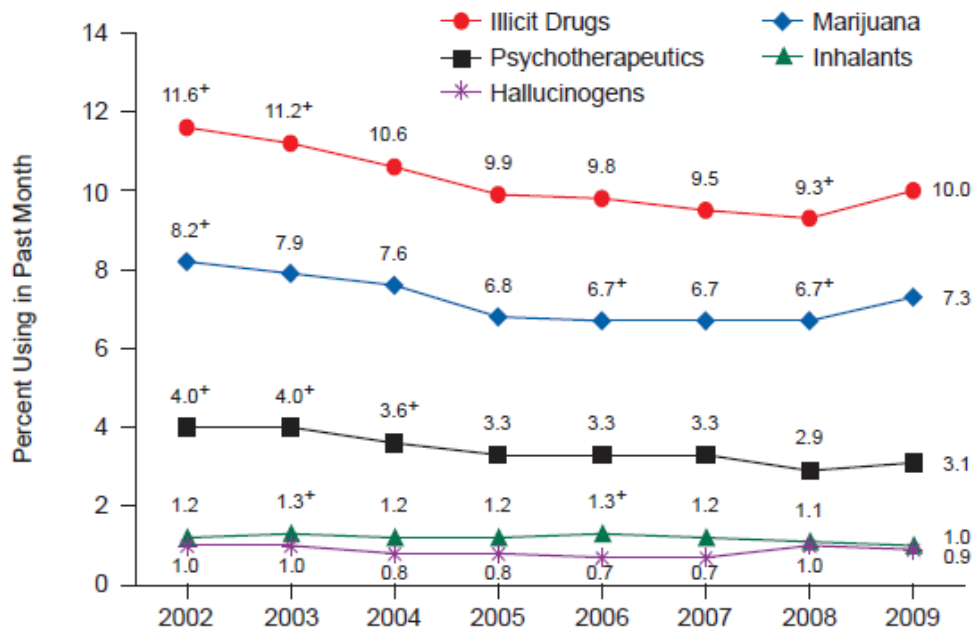
**Figure 2.5 Past Month Illicit Drug Use among Persons Aged 12 or Older, by Age: 2002-2009**



<sup>+</sup> Difference between this estimate and the 2009 estimate is statistically significant at the .05 level.

Rates of illegal drug use, including marijuana use, among youth aged 12 to 17 declined from 2002 through 2008.

**Figure 2.6 Past Month Use of Selected Illicit Drugs among Youths Aged 12 to 17: 2002-2009**



<sup>+</sup> Difference between this estimate and the 2009 estimate is statistically significant at the .05 level.

***Increase in drug use to 2009 and looking ahead:***

In 2009, use of illicit drugs took a sharply upward turn. This increase in illegal drug use, and in particular marijuana use, reflects broad changes in the attitudes of Americans. Advocates of Harm Reduction were energized by their continuing successes in changing the way Americans think about illegal drugs – that they were less harmful – and in changing state laws, particularly the growing acceptance of medical marijuana. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia approved marijuana for “medical” use. Many supporters of medical marijuana were dropping their camouflage and outwardly advocating for the ultimate drug policy goal of the legalization of marijuana. Starting with marijuana, their objective was to remove the role of criminal justice system in drug policy.

Based on past experience, the success of Harm Reduction, if continued, will result in rapidly rising rates of illegal drug use, including but not limited to marijuana, since drug using behaviors (and therefore drug use rates) often are linked to perceptions of the relative harmfulness of illegal drug use. With the increase in marijuana use in 2009, the perception waned of the associated harm of marijuana use. However, it is important to note that rates of alcohol and tobacco use also declined among youth, confirming that the prohibition of illicit drugs did not cause an upswing in legal drug use. The nation appears to be at a tipping point as drug policy has emerged as a major public policy focus.

**Conclusions**

Based on the previous experience from 1973 to 1979, the current dramatic rise in the toleration and the corresponding rising levels of illegal drug use can be predicted to generate a renewed and broadly-based opposition. An early sign of this reaction manifested itself in 2009 and 2010 when multiple state marijuana legalization efforts were successfully defeated; this reflects a persistent broadly based public reluctance to permit free access to marijuana. Continued and future opposition to permissive attitudes and laws toward

illegal drug use will likely center on the high social costs of illegal drug use and the valuable role of the criminal justice system in essential public health efforts to limit the use of marijuana and other illegal drugs.

One area that shows promise for the future of reducing illegal drug use is a growing trend to shift the role of the criminal justice system so that it manages the 5 million offenders in community corrections on parole and probation more effectively. The number of Drug Courts in the US has increased dramatically in the 2000's, balancing law enforcement with treatment choices for non-violent drug offenders. In addition, probation and parole programs that combine intensive random drug testing with swift and certain, but brief, incarceration for any drug use or other violation while under supervision have had great success. This approach has gained strong bipartisan support because not only does it reduce illegal drug use and new crimes in this high-using, high-problem-causing population, but also rates of incarceration and correctional costs.

During the past four decades there has been considerable long-term success in reducing illegal drug use in the US. However much remains to be done, as recent rates of illegal drug use have increased in tandem with changing attitudes and perceptions of risk. Changes in the criminal justice system in conjunction with increased public education, prevention programs and policies hold great promise. The rise in illegal drug use that peaked in 1979 resulted in a successful pushback by the Parents' Movement. It is possible that a continued rise in illegal drug use will once again create a similar strong grassroots response.

For more information about the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. visit [www.ibhinc.org](http://www.ibhinc.org).

**Robert L. DuPont, M.D.**  
**President, Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc.**  
**First Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) 1973 to 1978**

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<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1999). *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Main findings 1997* (Office of Applied Sciences). Rockville, MD.

<sup>2</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1999). *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Main findings 1997* (Office of Applied Sciences). Rockville, MD.

<sup>3</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2003). *Overview of Findings from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (Office of Applied Studies, NHSDA Series H-21, DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3774). Rockville, MD.

<sup>4</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 10-4586 Findings).

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2010). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2009: Volume I, Secondary school students* (NIH Publication No. 10-7584). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse.

<sup>6</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 10-4586 Findings).

<sup>7</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 10-4586 Findings).