

Originally published 05:45 a.m., December 15, 2009, updated 02:49 p.m., December 15, 2009

Study: Teens smoking more pot, less tobacco

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Cigarette smoking is out but pot use is in among the nation's teenagers, who also report a higher use of prescription painkillers and a waning perception about the risk of illicit drugs, a federal study on students has found.

As more states move to approve medical marijuana, and pot legalization and decriminalization become more mainstream in the national discussion, teens seem more accepting of pot use, according to a study released Monday by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The national survey, "Monitoring the Future," was conducted by the University of Michigan and queried 47,097 students in the eighth, 10th and 12th grades.

It found that one-fifth of seniors - 20.6 percent - reported using marijuana in the previous month, up from 18.3 percent in 2006. High school sophomores' pot smoking rose from 13.8 percent in 2008 to 15.9 percent this year, statistics that researchers said should capture the nation's attention.

"So far, we have not seen any dramatic rise in marijuana use, but the upward trending of the past two or three years stands in stark contrast to the steady decline that preceded it for nearly a decade," said Lloyd Johnston, who serves as principal investigator on the Michigan study, which has tracked teen drug use since 1975.

"Not only is use rising, but a key belief about the degree of risk associated with marijuana use has been in decline among young people even longer, and the degree to which teens disapprove of use of the drug has recently begun to decline," Mr. Johnston said. "Changes in these beliefs and attitudes are often very influential in driving changes in use."

Judy Kreamer, president of Educating Voices Inc., a nonprofit drug-education and drug-prevention organization in Naperville, Ill., called the survey results "very disturbing" but said they come as no surprise given the messages that advocates have sent youths in recent years.

"Today, if you watch television or listen to the radio, you cannot help but hear people laugh and tell jokes about marijuana," she said. "There is a lot of information out there that it's just a medicine and isn't as bad as alcohol. We have to straighten that misinformation out - for our

children's sake.

"I want people to understand that marijuana is a harmful drug, and we have to keep our children safe. It's our responsibility, and part of that requires that we educate ourselves about the harms associated with marijuana and that we then impart those concerns to our young people so that they understand."

Among the study's bright spots: Methamphetamine use, binge drinking and cigarette smoking have declined.

The number of eighth-graders who reported smoking within the past month dropped from 19.4 percent in 1997 to 6.5 percent this year. Twelfth-grader smoking also dipped, from 36.5 percent in 1997 to 20.1 percent in 2009, marking the "lowest point in the history of the survey on all measures," among all grades surveyed, researchers said.

Cocaine use was also on the decline, with use among seniors falling from 4.4 percent in 2008 to 3.4 percent in 2009.

Seniors also registered an attitude shift on the perceived harmfulness of hallucinogens such as LSD, along with amphetamines, sedatives/barbiturates and heroin, and there was a heightened perception that drug availability was declining.

"These latest data confirm that we must redouble our efforts to implement a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to preventing and treating drug use," said Gil Kerlikowske, who heads the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"Continued erosion in youth attitudes and behavior toward substance abuse should give pause to all parents and policymakers," Mr. Kerlikowske said Monday as results from the study were released at the National Press Club in Washington.

The University of Michigan researchers noted that the percentage of teens using any illicit drug is up in 2009 over the past two years, but that the proportion of the students who reported using any drug other than pot is declining for those in the eighth and 12th grades.

The investigators said they remained concerned, however, that the perceived risk of using such drugs as Ecstasy, LSD and other inhalants has fallen, even as their reported use among teens has dropped.

"Given the glamorous name and reputation of [Ecstasy], I could easily imagine it making a comeback as younger children entering their teens become increasingly unaware of its risks," Mr. Johnston said.

"While LSD use is at historically low levels at present, the proportion of students seeing its use as dangerous has been in decline for a long time (although it did not decline further this year in two of the three grades), removing a major obstacle to experimentation. We have seen LSD make a comeback before. Clearly, it could happen again," he said.