



## **White House Turns Attention To Teens And Drugs**

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The federal government's national survey on Drug Use and Health reported that teenagers are using marijuana more often and at younger ages. Results come from interviews with roughly 67,500 civilian, non-institutionalized people ages 12 and older who are living in America. To learn more about what the survey and what the results mean for the nation's youth, host Michel Martin speaks with Gil Kerlikowske, director of the White House Office of National Drug Policy.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130673596>

MICHEL MARTIN, host:

I'm Michel Martin, and this is TELL ME MORE, from NPR News.

Every parent of a teenage son or daughter keeps a laundry list of hopes and fears for their not-so-little boys and girls. And among the fears many parents have is drug use. And a new survey from the federal government suggests that those fears might not be so out of place.

According to the latest national survey on drug use and health, one in 10 kids between the ages of 12 and 17 used an illegal drug in the past month. And that's an increase from prior years. In a moment, we'll hear from our moms roundtable to tell us what they are telling their kids about illegal drugs.

But, first, though, we wanted to learn more about this survey and talk about its findings. So we've invited Gil Kerlikowske. He is the director of the White House Office of National Drug Policy. He was kind enough to stop by our Washington, D.C. studio.

Welcome back. Thanks for joining us once again.

Mr. GIL KERLIKOWSKE (Director, White House Office of National Drug Policy): And thanks, Michel, for having me.

MARTIN: What leaps out at you about this survey? What do you think is the most important finding?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: I think there are two important findings. One is that this increase in drug use is led by marijuana. And the second part is that the age of initiation - the first time a young person started using marijuana - dropped from 17.8 years to 17 years, and that's actually quite significant.

MARTIN: Because that's an average. So one has to assume that if that's the average, the actual earliest use for some people is much younger.

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: And that's exactly right. And the concern there is that for the six years that we have had that data, the number had always gone up. This was a year that it not only went down, but it went down by a significant number.

MARTIN: Why do you think that is?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, I think there are a couple of reasons. One is that there is a huge amount of public attention to equating medicine and marijuana. And that is the wrong message. I have met with high school kids from Portland to the Bronx. And when they talk about medicine and marijuana, they say this is sending the wrong message to us.

MARTIN: The survey points out that the current rate of marijuana use has actually gone back to where it was in 2002. There had been a steady decrease in the number of kids using it, and the age at which they had started using it was rising. And both of those numbers have reversed to where they were about a decade ago. Why do you think that is?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, we saw two years ago in the survey work that kids' concerns or their perception of risk about drug use was decreasing. Remember, too, that we've also seen a big increase in the use of prescription drugs. Kids really don't perceive prescription drugs as dangerous because they say, hey. It's coming out of the medicine cabinet.

MARTIN: You pointed out just a minute ago that the conversations we are having around marijuana have changed. And, in fact, well, I think everybody knows that marijuana has been widely consumed for decades in this country. But recently, the tenor of the discussion has shifted. And I'm thinking particularly about California, and Governor Schwarzenegger there recently signed a law which downgrades the penalty for possession of under an ounce from a misdemeanor to an infraction that essentially carries a fine. It's a ticket.

But even more striking is that you've got a number of former leaders of government suggesting that, really, decriminalization is the way we ought to go. For example, here's former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders. And this is what she's been saying about the issue. This is a recent interview with her on CNN.

Ms. JOYCELYN ELDERS (Former Surgeon General): It's not a toxic substance that would cause people to die. And I just think that we can use our resources so much better. And I think we need to legalize marijuana for adults and tax it so we can use the money for much better things.

MARTIN: Well, what about that?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, we don't think that that is actually a very good position. If you look at the research that tells you how much money a state and how much money the federal government collects in taxes - for instance, on alcohol, it's about for every dollar collected, they spend about \$8 in health care and criminal justice costs. Look at drunk driving. Look at people going through alcohol treatment programs.

MARTIN: So you're saying that our efforts to sort of tax, regulate and educate about alcohol and prescription drugs aren't working particularly well now, so why add a third thing.

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, I think that's a good way of putting it. Why add another - as the San Diego Tribune said - another mind-altering substance out into the free market when we're doing such, virtually, a poor job with alcohol and prescription drugs?

MARTIN: Well, one argument that many people make is that you've got two million people incarcerated in this country. It's the largest population of incarcerated people in the world, particularly when you compare it to our sort of peer economies. And people say, what about the cost that it imposes upon them and their families for decades afterwards in lost wages and stigma and so forth? And many people look at that and say that that is at least as much as the social cost as marijuana would impose. What do you say to that?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, I would tell you that when you look at the numbers of who's actually incarcerated for things like only possessing marijuana, California essentially decriminalized marijuana 30 years ago. So that belief that our prisons are full of people that were possessing small amounts of marijuana for personal use is just essentially false.

MARTIN: Do you ever talk to the president directly about this issue? I mean, and particularly as a person who acknowledges that he sampled marijuana as a young person - you know, I'm not judging the matter, but it does appear that he doesn't seem to have suffered any ill effect from it. And I wonder if you've ever had a personal conversation with him about it?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: I have certainly briefed the president on drug policy, and the national drug control strategy that he issued from the Oval Office in May of this year is certainly his strategy. And it talks about his opposition to legalization.

MARTIN: The administration is requesting an additional \$200 million in the fiscal year 2011 budget, and that's specifically supporting drug prevention efforts. And I just think a lot of people would like to know: What do you think should be done differently?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, what we'd like to see with the prevention money is a comprehensive approach. When we know that kids get a message from a trusted caregiver - like a parent, a teacher, somebody in their faith-based community -and they're told about the dangers of drugs, when they get that whole message, we can actually change things for them for the future, including reducing drug use in the future.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. We're talking about new federal numbers that suggest that teenagers are using marijuana more often and at younger ages than in past years. We're speaking with the director of the White House Office of National Drug Policy, Gil Kerlikowske.

What message would you like parents, you know, influential adults to be giving at this point?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, we know, for instance, on the - our Web site, [theantidrug.com](http://theantidrug.com), there's a lot of information because, quite frankly, we know that a lot of parents are uncomfortable talking to their kids or young people about this, and they need talking points. They need help to get that conversation going. And they need facts. The last thing you want to do is to use fear tactics.

The other part that's on that Web site, it also helps parents understand, well, what should I look for in a child? What should I be aware of if there's changes in my son or daughter's attitude and their grades, et cetera? All that information is really available. Parents, by far, really, in this whole fight, are the key.

MARTIN: There's a measure on the ballot in California this November that would explicitly decriminalize marijuana use. It's called Proposition 19, and it's gotten a lot of attention. What will the administration's posture be if this measure passes?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, the attorney general had sent out a letter to the former administrators or heads of the Drug Enforcement Administration making it very clear that the federal government and its resources would continue to enforce the Control Substances Act. That's the federal law surrounding drugs in the United States.

The other part that's brought up - and I think Governor Schwarzenegger has brought this up, too - it would be such an incredible state of confusion in California and for other states particularly around California if in fact the voters pass that.

MARTIN: Just setting all other illicit drugs aside, how is marijuana really that different from alcohol? Because the supporters of decriminalization say, you know, from the standpoint of health effects, it's actually more benign. What is your answer to that?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, two things that I'd tell you. One is that if you look at the tests done over the years for the potency of marijuana, there is a large increase in how much more potent today's marijuana is versus a number of years ago. The second important fact is that when you look at who calls a helpline and says, you know, I have a problem with a substance and I need help, professional help, that first call is over marijuana ahead of everything else.

MARTIN: Really? I didn't know that.

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Yeah.

MARTIN: How long has that been true?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, it's true in my own state. It's true in other states where the voluntary calls to the helpline, marijuana leads the way.

MARTIN: Finally, before we let you go, I'd like to ask about Mexico. The level of violence that a number of states and provinces are experiencing in Mexico, which I think most reasonable people attribute to the drug trade. There's obviously a concern that this will spill over across the border to the United States. And I'd like to ask, how concerned are you? And what do you have to say, you know, about that?

I mean, obviously, when one speaks to Mexican officials they'd say if the demand, you know, the U.S. demand is driving this phenomenon, is there any additional insight you can offer us about that?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, the insight is that there's always been some cross border violence for many, many, many years. We're now seeing spillover violence either in crime numbers that are being reported in the United States. And I think there are a lot of reasons for that. American law enforcement is pretty diligent. They have good resources.

The other part is that, by the way, the cartels don't just make their money off drugs anymore. They are involved in every type of crime from kidnapping, extortion, arson. So as we've done a better job of clamping down on the border, we have seen these cartels that President Calderon is courageously taking on, become unfortunately much more flexible at being involved in other profit making illegal enterprises like the ones I mentioned.

MARTIN: Is the administration concerned about its relations with Mexico if Proposition 19 is approved - and the message that it sends?

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, it sends a strong and wrong message to the people of Mexico and particularly to the Calderon administration. And President Calderon has made that very clear. On the other hand, the president, the attorney general, the Office of Drug Control Policy, all of us have made it very clear our opposition to what is going on in California.

MARTIN: Before I let you go, and not to start harping on this point, I am intrigued, though, by the fact that there are serious people who do support decriminalization. I mean, you know, there's a stereotype that, you know, it's kind of the guys with, you know, the, you know, rangy hair wearing, you know, hemp leaves on their T-shirts.

And, you know - but if that was ever really true, it is no longer true. There are, you know, serious people like Joycelyn Elders, who is a former surgeon general, Kurt Schmoke, who's the dean of Howard Law School, former mayor of Baltimore, thinkers, people like George Soros, the financier and the philanthropist who supports a number of, you know, public service initiatives around the country, very seriously believe that this is just a huge waste of resources to stay on this prohibitionist policy toward marijuana. And I'm just curious how you respond to that.

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Well, I think that we have separate, clearly, decriminalization versus legalization. And there isn't a plan in place that would say, well, gee, if we legalize drugs, here's how it would work. And the proposition in California essentially would allow every city and county to come up with whatever plan they happen to think would be applicable. That's probably no way to run a government.

MARTIN: Gil Kerlikowske is the director of the White House Office of National Drug Policy. He was kind enough to join us here in our Washington, D.C. studios. Thank you so much for joining us.

Mr. KERLIKOWSKE: Thank you, Michel.

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