

Commentary

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Marijuana Use is Up and the Perception of Risk of Marijuana Use is Down Among American Youth

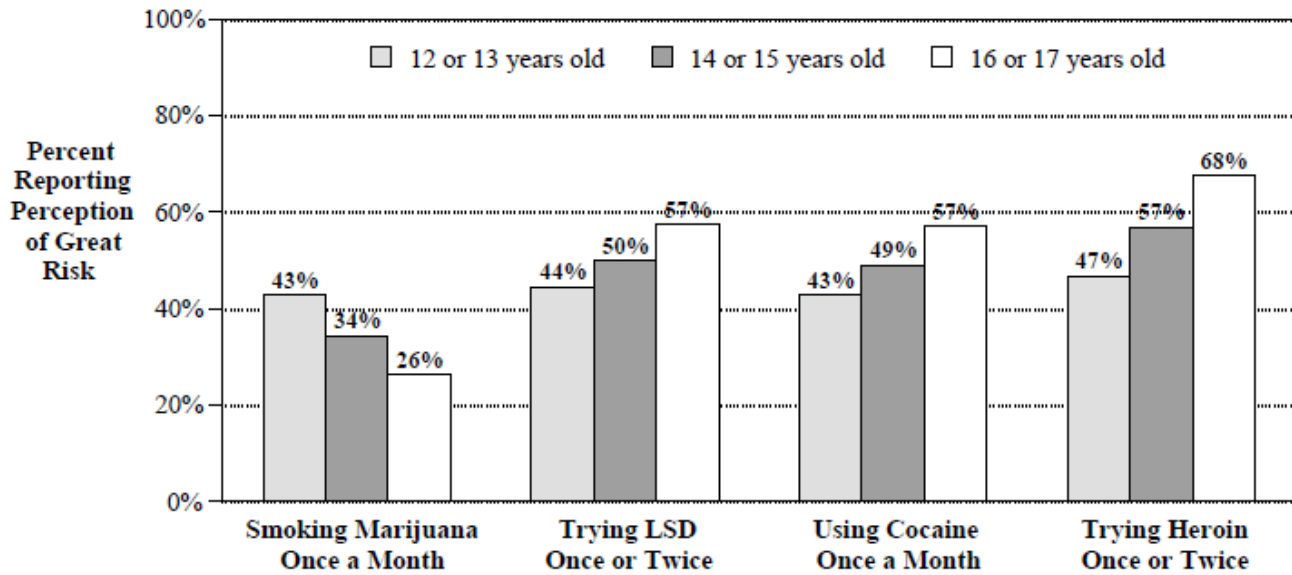
Self-reported rates of youth drug use have recently demonstrated two notable, opposing trends. As reports from the Monitoring the Future (MTF) annual study of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students show, within the last two years youth marijuana use has increased while use of other illegal drugs has decreased or remained stagnant.ⁱ To put these trends in dramatic perspective, more 12th grade students reported past 30-day marijuana use (20.6%) than the percentage of 12th grade students who reported past month cigarette use (20.1%).ⁱⁱ

Looking back on rates of marijuana use by American youth, the upturn in use seen in the early 1990's was the result of renewed efforts of the pro-marijuana movement focused on medical marijuana. In recent years, the drug policy "reform" movement has expanded, supporting not only decriminalization, but also legalization of marijuana. In this movement, marijuana is defined as different from other illegal drugs and passed off as a harmless modern lifestyle choice rather than as a drug of abuse. Join Together reports that "marijuana use has crept back up to the levels last reported five years ago after a steady decline in reported use dating back to the mid-1990s."ⁱⁱⁱ While the pro-marijuana lobby would have Americans believe that increases in marijuana use are inevitable, the reality is quite different. Marijuana use peaked in the U.S. in 1979 when 13.2% of Americans aged 12 and older had used marijuana at least once within the prior 30 days.^{iv} That figure bottomed out at 4.6% in 1993 and after a recent rise stood at 6.1% in 2008.^v

Underlying the recent rise in the rates of youth marijuana use is a fall in the perception of risk from marijuana use. Two aspects of this shift in rates of use and perceived risk deserve special attention. The first is the distinction between rates of use of marijuana use by youth (which are up) and those for some other commonly used illegal drugs (which are down or flat). The second is that the perceived risk of marijuana use falls through the teenage years while the perceived risk of use of other illegal drugs rises.

To demonstrate this point, the Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR) reports that youth ages 12 and 13 perceived greater risk in smoking marijuana (43%) than 14 and 15 year olds (35%) and 16 and 17 year olds (26%).^{vi} Unlike perceived risk of marijuana use, the perception of risk of using illegal drugs such as LSD, cocaine and heroin increases with age in this same population. In all three cases, a higher percentage of 16 and 17 year-olds perceived great risk in using these drugs than the two younger age groups. The difference between perceptions about marijuana and other drugs can be attributed to a false distinction about these drugs of abuse.

Perception of Great Risk of Using Selected Substances, by Age
(2007 and 2008 data combined; n=44,979)



The glaring disparity between the trends in perception of risk of marijuana use and perception of risk of using other illegal drugs with age also reflects the favorable mainstream media coverage of drug policy “reformists” who advocate for medical marijuana and marijuana legalization. Simply put, these movements are based on the false premise that marijuana is different from other drugs of abuse. Marijuana is the single most abused illegal drug in the world. The correct public health message is clear: like tobacco and alcohol use, marijuana use by youth is unhealthy, unwise and illegal. The current lack of clarity on this point is undermining prevention efforts and adversely affecting the nation’s youth.

Reducing the demand for drugs is a key part of the Obama Administration’s drug policy efforts now being developed by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). As its Director, R. Gil Kerlikowske recently stated at a press conference releasing the new MTF data, “These latest data confirm that we must redouble our efforts to implement a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to preventing and treating drug use.”^{vii} Reducing marijuana use by American youth is at the heart of these new demand reduction efforts.

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) supports a revitalization of drug use prevention efforts targeted at America’s youth. The latest findings on marijuana use and perceived risk of use are a strong call to action and not a reason for discouragement. They reflect the negative impact of pro-marijuana movements which view marijuana use, including its use by teenagers, as benign or trivial. IBH encourages government offices, educational organizations and schools, as well as the media to provide clear, accurate messages about the dangers of marijuana use in order to resume the long-standing downward trends in marijuana use in the U.S. including by its youth.

For more information on IBH, please visit www.ibhinc.org.

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The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) focuses on national drug abuse policies that emphasize prevention and investment in better treatment approaches. Established in 1978, IBH is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization working to reduce substance abuse through the power of good ideas. IBH’s websites include www.ibhinc.org, www.StopDruggedDriving.org, and www.PreventionNotPunishment.org.

ⁱ Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. (December 14, 2009). "Teen marijuana use tilts up, while some drugs decline in use." University of Michigan News Service: Ann Arbor, MI. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org>

ⁱⁱ Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. Table 3. Trends in 30-day prevalence of use of various drugs in grades 8, 10, and 12. Monitoring the Future. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/data/09data/pr09t3.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Curley B. (2009, December 15). Smoke signals: Marijuana use rises among H.S. students as cigarettes use declines, study finds. Join Together. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from <http://www.jointogether.org/news/features/2009/smoke-signals-marijuana-use.html?log-event=sp2f-view-item&nid=58758741>.

^{iv} Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1995). *National Household Report on Drug Abuse Advance Report #18*. Retrieved December 17, 2009 from <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nhsda/ar18ttoc.htm>

^v Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, MD.

^{vi} Center for Substance Abuse Research. (2009, December 7). Perception of risk associated with marijuana use decreases with age while perceived risk from using LSD, cocaine, or heroin increases with age. CESAR FAX Volume 18, Issue 48.

^{vii} Curley B. (2009, December 15). Smoke signals: Marijuana use rises among H.S. students as cigarettes use declines, study finds. Join Together. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from <http://www.jointogether.org/news/features/2009/smoke-signals-marijuana-use.html?log-event=sp2f-view-item&nid=58758741>.