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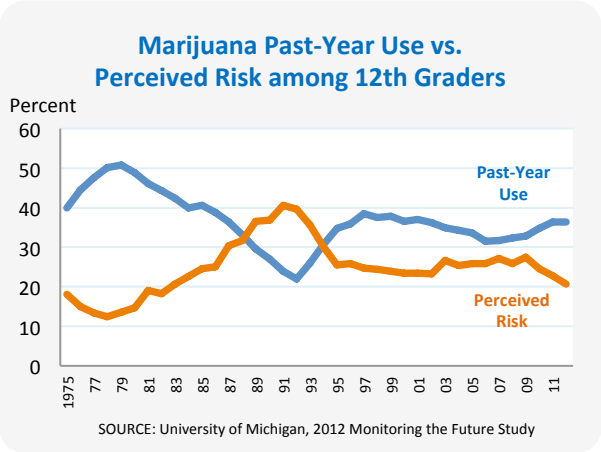
High School and Youth Trends

Every year, the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey measures drug, alcohol, and tobacco use and related attitudes among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. Following are facts and statistics about youth substance use from the 2012 MTF report.

Illicit Drug Use

Illicit drug use among teenagers has continued at high rates, largely due to the popularity of marijuana. Marijuana use by adolescents declined from the late 1990s until the mid-to-late 2000s, but has been on the increase since then. In 2012, 6.5 percent of 8th graders, 17.0 percent of 10th graders, and 22.9 percent of 12th graders used marijuana in the past month—an increase among 10th and 12th graders from 14.2 percent, and 18.8 percent in 2007. Daily use has also increased; 6.5 percent of 12th graders now use marijuana every day, compared to 5.1 percent in the 2007.

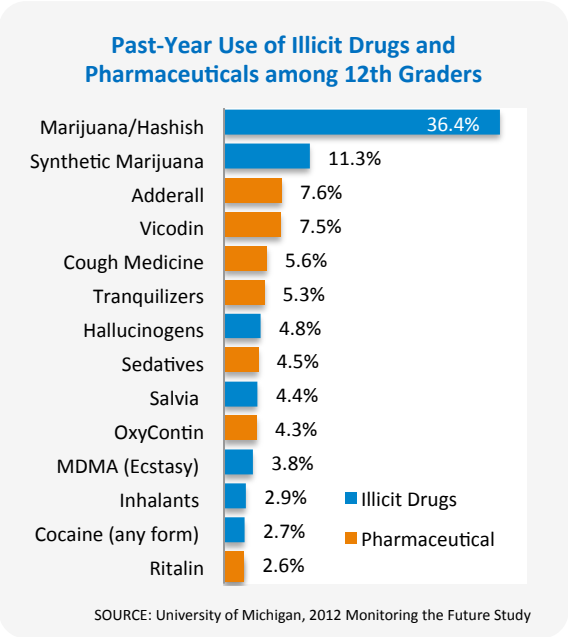
Rising marijuana use reflects changing perceptions and attitudes. Historically, as perception of risks goes down, use goes up (and vice versa-see figure). Young people are showing decreased perception that marijuana is dangerous. The growing perception of marijuana as a safe drug may reflect recent public discussions over medical marijuana and marijuana legalization.



Synthetic marijuana is a new and major concern. Also known as Spice or K2, synthetic marijuana refers to herbal mixtures laced with synthetic cannabinoids, chemicals that act in the brain similarly to THC, the main active ingredient in marijuana. These mixtures could be obtained legally until recently and are still wrongly perceived as a safe alternative to marijuana. Synthetic marijuana was added to the MTF survey in 2011. In that year, 11.4 percent of 12th graders—one in nine—reported using it in the past year. This year 4.4 percent of 8th graders, 8.8 percent of 10th graders, and 11.3 percent of 12th graders reported past-year use.

Nonmedical use of prescription and over-the-counter medicines remains a

significant part of the teen drug problem. In 2012, 14.8 percent of high-school seniors used a prescription drug non-medically in the past year. Data for specific drugs show that the most commonly abused prescription drugs by teens are the stimulant Adderall and the pain reliever Vicodin (see figure).



Positive trends in the past several years include reduced use of inhalants and less use of cocaine. Inhalant use is at its lowest levels in the history of the survey. Past-year inhalant use by younger teens dropped significantly between 2007 and 2012, from 8.3 percent of 8th graders and 6.6 percent of 10th graders to 6.2 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively. Past-year use of cocaine by 12th graders dropped from 5.2 percent to 2.7 percent from 2007 to 2012. Other drugs, such as heroin, methamphetamine, and hallucinogens, are holding fairly steady.

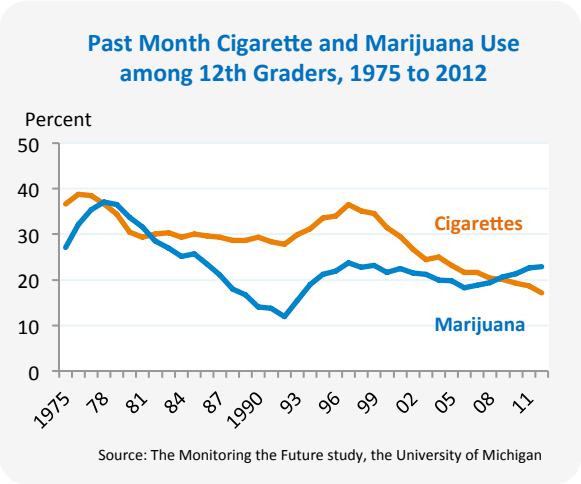
Ecstasy (MDMA) is seeing a significant drop among teens. Past-year use of ecstasy by 12th graders decreased from 5.3 percent in 2011 to 3.8 percent in 2012. Among 10th and 8th graders it dropped from 4.5 to 3.0 percent and from 1.7 to 1.1 percent, respectively.

Alcohol

Alcohol use among teens has dropped to historically low levels. In 2012, 3.6 percent of 8th graders, 14.5 percent of 10th graders, and 28.1 percent of 12th graders reported getting drunk in the past month, continuing a long-term, downward trend.. Significant declines include 5-year drops in daily alcohol use by 8th, 10th and 12th graders (0.3 percent, 1.0 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively, in 2012). In 2012, 23.7 percent of high-school seniors reported binge drinking (defined as 5 or more drinks in a row in the past 2 weeks)—a drop of one-quarter since the late 1990s.

Tobacco

Fewer teens smoke cigarettes than smoke marijuana. Cigarette smoking by high-school students peaked in 1996–1997 and has declined continuously since then. In contrast, marijuana use has been rising in recent years. Now, while 17.1 percent of 12th graders were current (past-month) cigarette smokers—the lowest it has been in the history of the survey—22.9 percent were current marijuana smokers.



Other forms of smoked tobacco are remain popular, however. The use of hookah water pipes and small cigars has raised public health concerns and has recently been added to the MTF survey. In 2012, 18.3 percent of 12th graders had smoked a hookah in the past year, and 19.9 percent had smoked a small cigar.

Learn More

Complete MTF survey results are available at www.monitoringthefuture.org. For more information on the survey and its findings, also visit www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/monitoring-future.

Other sources of information on drug use trends among youth are available:

The annual National Survey of Drug Use and Health, conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, gathers detailed data on drug, alcohol, and tobacco use by all age groups. It is a comprehensive source of information on substance use and dependence among Americans aged 12 and older. Data and reports can be found at www.oas.samhsa.gov/NSDUHLatest.htm.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey is a school-based survey conducted every other year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It gathers data on a wide variety of health-related risk behaviors, including drug abuse, from students in grades 9–12. More information is available at www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/yrbs/index.htm.

About the Survey

Since 1975, the MTF survey has measured drug, alcohol, and cigarette use and related attitudes among 12th graders, nationwide. In 1991, 8th and 10th graders were added to the survey. Survey participants report their drug use behaviors across three time periods: lifetime, past year, and past month. Overall, 45,449 students from 395 public and private schools in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades participated in the 2012 survey.

The survey is funded by NIDA and conducted by the University of Michigan. Results from the survey are released each December.