Monitoring the Future Survey: High School and Youth Trends

This year's Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey of drug use and attitudes among American 8th, 10th, and 12th graders is encouraging, with past-year use of illicit drugs other than marijuana continuing to decline to the lowest level in the history of the survey in all three grades—5.4 percent among 8th graders, 9.8 percent among 10th graders, and 14.3 percent among 12th graders. This is down from peak rates of 12.6 percent for 8th graders in 1995, and 18.4 percent for 10th graders in 1996, and 21.6 percent for 12th graders in 2001.

Use of many substances is at its lowest level since the survey's inception, including alcohol, cigarettes, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, inhalants, and sedatives (reported only by 12th graders). Other illicit drugs showed 5-year declines, including marijuana (among 8th and 10th graders), synthetic cannabinoids (K2/herbal incense, sometimes called "synthetic marijuana"), prescription opioids (reported in the survey as "narcotics other than heroin"), hallucinogens, amphetamines, and over-the-counter cough and cold medications.
The survey, however, also found a general decline in perceived risk of harm and disapproval of using a number of substances. For example, fewer 8th graders think that taking Ecstasy (MDMA) or synthetic cathinones ("bath salts") occasionally is harmful, and fewer report disapproval of taking Ecstasy or inhalants regularly. Among 10th graders, there was a decrease in the percentage of students who perceive a risk of harm from the following:

- trying inhalants or synthetic cathinones once or twice
- taking Crack, Vicodin®, or synthetic cathinones occasionally
- using inhalants regularly

**Marijuana**

Marijuana use declined among 8th and 10th graders and remains unchanged among 12th graders compared to 5 years ago, despite the changing state marijuana laws. Past-year use of marijuana is at its lowest level in more than 2 decades among 8th and 10th graders.

Daily use of marijuana declined among 8th graders compared to last year, from 1.1 to 0.7 percent. Among both 8th and 10th graders, daily marijuana use decreased over the past 5 years from 1.3 to 0.7 percent and from 3.6 to 2.5 percent, respectively. Among 12th graders, 6.0 percent continue to report daily use—that’s about 1 in 16 high school seniors. Among all grades, the perception of risk associated with smoking marijuana regularly continues to decline, with only 31.1 percent of 12th graders reporting that regular marijuana use is harmful compared to 58.3 percent in 2000. However, disapproval among 12th graders remains somewhat high, with 68.5 percent saying they disapprove of smoking marijuana regularly.
The survey also showed that there continues to be a higher rate of marijuana use among 12th graders in states with medical marijuana laws compared to states without them. In 2016, 38.3 percent of high school seniors in states with medical marijuana laws reported past-year marijuana use compared to 33.3 percent in nonmedical marijuana states. Previous studies have suggested that these differences precede enactment of medical marijuana laws.

This year, daily marijuana use exceeded cigarette use among 10th (2.5 vs. 1.9 percent) as well as 12th (6.0 vs. 4.8 percent) graders.
Alcohol
Alcohol use and binge drinking continued to decline among all grades and for nearly all time period measures. Past-year use of alcohol was reported by 17.6 percent, 38.3 percent, and 55.6 percent of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, respectively, compared to 26.9 percent, 49.8 percent, and 63.5 percent in 2011. Daily alcohol use decreased significantly among 12th graders to 1.3 percent, and binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks sometime in the past 2 weeks) declined among 8th graders to 3.4 percent.

The percentage of high school students who reported ever using alcohol dropped by as much as 60 percent compared to peak years. This year’s survey found that 22.8 percent of 8th graders reported ever trying alcohol, a 60 percent drop from a peak of 55.8 percent in 1994. Among 10th graders, lifetime use fell by 40 percent from 72.0 percent in 1997 to 43.4 percent this year. Among 12th graders, there was a significant 25 percent drop in lifetime alcohol use from 81.7 percent in 1997 to the current 61.2 percent.

Nicotine and Tobacco
Use of traditional cigarettes has continued to decline to the lowest levels in the survey’s history. Significant 5-year declines—by more than half in past-month use, daily use, and use of 1/2 pack or more per day—were reported by all grades. Daily cigarette use was reported by 0.9 percent of 8th graders, 1.9 percent of 10th graders, and 4.8 percent of 12th graders in 2016. This was down from peaks of 10.4 percent and 18.3 percent among 8th and 10th graders in 1996 and from 24.6 percent of 12th graders in 1997.
For a second year in a row, the MTF survey asked high school students about their use of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes). Significant decreases in use from last year were reported by 8th (6.2 vs. 9.5 percent), 10th (10.3 vs. 14.0 percent), and 12th graders (12.4 vs. 16.2 percent). When asked about the last time they used an electronic vaporizer (including e-cigarettes), 24.9 percent of 12th graders reported that they inhaled nicotine, 6.8 percent inhaled marijuana, and 5.6 percent did not know what they were inhaling.
The survey also found an increase in the percentage of teens who view regular use of e-cigarettes as harmful—from 18.5 percent to 21.3 percent among 8th graders and from 17.0 percent to 19.1 percent among 10th graders.

Use of other tobacco products, including hookahs and little cigars, also declined among high school seniors. Among 12th graders, past-year tobacco use with a hookah fell from 19.8 percent to 13.0 percent, and both 8th and 12th graders reported a decrease in their past-month use of little cigars including flavored and nonflavored versions.

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**Opioids**

Despite the continued rise in opioid misuse and overdose deaths among adults, past-year misuse of prescription opioids has continued to decline among high school seniors. Over the past 5 years, misuse has dropped 45 percent, from 8.7 to 4.8 percent. Heroin use remains very low, with past-year use reported by 0.3 percent in all grades.
Synthetic Drugs
Past-year use of synthetic cannabinoids has dropped significantly since the survey has been tracking its use. Reported use among 12th graders has dropped from 11.4 percent in 2011 to 3.5 percent. Use has also fallen from 4.4 percent to 2.7 percent among 8th graders and from 8.8 percent to 3.3 percent among 10th graders since 2012.

In recent years, synthetic cathinones have become a concern among youth. The MTF survey began tracking their use in 2012 and, since then, there has been a decrease among 12th graders from 1.3 percent to 0.8 percent. However, among 8th graders, there was a significant increase from 0.4 percent in 2015 to 0.9 percent in 2016.
Learn More

For more information about the Monitoring the Future survey and results, please visit:
  • the Monitoring the Future website
  • the NIDA's Monitoring the Future webpage

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