

RESEARCH UPDATE

BUTLER CENTER FOR RESEARCH SEPTEMBER 2009

Current Trends in Substance Abuse

Estimating the degree of substance abuse in the United States is a persistent challenge for researchers. Population-based surveys remain one of the primary tools used to characterize the changing nature and extent of drug and alcohol abuse in the general population. This *Research Update* presents a broad, general overview of current trends in drug and alcohol use based on the most recent national survey data.

National Survey on Drug Use & Health (NSDUH)

The NSDUH, formerly the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, is a long-stranding survey used to measure substance use in the United States. Conducted by the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, this population-based survey of adults age 12 and over has been administered regularly since 1979.¹ Modifications have been made to content and administration methods throughout the years (i.e., changes to content, computerizing portions). While the sampling design has varied somewhat over time, the NSDUH survey is representative of the US general, non-institutionalized, civilian population aged 12 and over who live in households.

Since 1999, nearly 70,000 respondents have been surveyed using computer-assisted interviewing (CAI) and computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) methods. Although self-reported data are the backbone of social science research, a measurement limitation inherent in any survey is respondent underreporting of certain behaviors that are seen as socially undesirable or stigmatized. This type of potential bias is especially pertinent when seeking personal information about past or present illegal activity, such as the use of illicit drugs. In addition, because drug and alcohol abuse carries a high degree of social disapproval, there is additional concern that survey respondents may not always be completely forthcoming in their response, thus compromising the validity of the findings.²

Table 1. Past Month Substance Use by Age Group – 2007
(% of population age 12 and over)

	TOTAL	Age 12–17	Age 18–25	age 26–34	age 35 +
Alcohol	51.1	15.9	61.2	62.6	52.2
Cigarettes	24.2	9.8	36.2	33.4	22.0
Binge Alcohol	23.3	9.7	41.8	35.1	18.9
Any Illicit Drug	8.0	9.5	19.7	10.9	4.6
Marijuana	5.8	6.7	16.4	7.9	3.0
Cocaine	.8	.4	1.7	1.4	.6
Tranquilizers	.7	2.1	2.5	1.0	.5
Stimulants	.4	1.5	2.1	.5	.3
Hallucinogens	.4	.7	1.5	.7	.1
Inhalants	.2	1.2	.4	.2	.1
Sedatives	.1	.5	.4	.2	.1
Heroin	.1	Not available	.3	.1	0

SOURCE: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2008.
PAST MONTH USE = any use in past 30 days.

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THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

People rarely become addicted to a single mood altering substance. Concomitant use of alcohol and other substances among addicted populations is the norm. For example, among patients discharged from Hazelden in 2008, 50% had a diagnosis involving both drugs and alcohol. Alcohol dependence was diagnosed for 90% of the patients, cannabis abuse or dependence for 38%, cocaine abuse or dependence 33%, amphetamine abuse or dependence for 19%, and opioid abuse or dependence for 27%.

The Hazelden treatment approach focuses primarily on the disease of addiction, not dependence on specific drugs per se. However, withdrawal medications are certainly drug specific, and individualized treatment plans incorporate methods to deal with the issues associated with primary substances of abuse. Treatment outcomes are consistent regardless of the primary drug of use.

CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

Question: Do drugs of choice change over time?

Answer: Yes. While alcohol is the most frequently used substance, there does appear to be a cyclical nature to the choice of illicit drugs. For example, heroin was the most frequently monitored drug in ER records in 1978–1985. However in 1986–1998, cocaine was most frequently mentioned.³ More recently, marijuana and the non-medical use of prescription drugs have become the most common illicit drugs used.⁴

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

Clearly, alcohol and tobacco are the two most widely used substances. The national survey data presented here illustrate that progress has been made in terms of reducing the abuse of particular drugs in the United States. Across all categories, current use has substantially declined over the past two decades. Because important differences in drug use patterns occur within various population subgroups and across geographic areas, additional sources of more locally relevant information should be sought.

Current Trends in Substance Abuse



In an effort to address these concerns, validity studies were conducted in 2000 and 2001.² Hair and urine samples were collected from respondents at the time of the interviews. A high degree of concordance was found between self-report and biological testing for drug use (between 85-99%).

Table one lists the percentages of the population aged 12 and older who reported current substance use in 2007. "Current use" is defined as any use during the past 30-day period prior to the interview. As shown, alcohol and tobacco were the most widely used substances. Alcohol use was the most prevalent (51.1%), followed by cigarettes (24.2%) and binge alcohol use (23.3%). "Binge alcohol" use is defined as having 5 or more drinks on one occasion during the past 30-day period. Illicit drug use placed a distant fourth (8.0%). In terms of actual numbers of people, these percentages translate into 126 million current alcohol drinkers, 60 million cigarette smokers, and 57.7 million binge drinkers.⁴

Roughly 19 million Americans reported use of illegal drugs (8% of the survey respondents). The most widely used illegal drug was marijuana with 5.8% of respondents, or 14.5 million Americans age 12 and older. Current use of illicit drugs other than marijuana was reported by 3.7 percent of the population. Most illicit drugs users between the ages of 18 and 49 were employed full-time (72%). Among full-time workers, there were 10.1 million illicit drug users and 10.6 million heavy drinkers¹, defined as those who had a least 5 drinks on the same occasion on at least five different days in the past month.

The prevalence of alcohol and drug use varies greatly according to gender, age, and race/ethnicity. Regarding alcohol, young adults are most likely to binge drink or drink heavily. Over half of current drinkers in the 18-25 were binge drinkers, and nearly one quarter were heavy drinkers. Men were more likely to drink than women (57% vs. 45%), more likely to binge drink (32% vs. 15%), and more likely to drink heavily (11% vs. 3%). Whites had the highest rate

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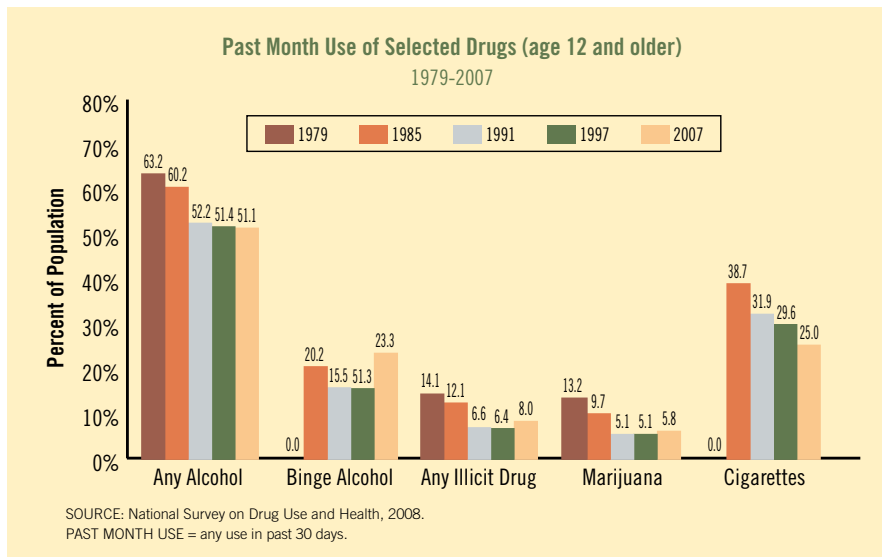
of alcohol use (56.1%) however American Indian or Alaskan Native individuals had the highest binge use (28.2%) rates.

Alcohol use was strongly associated with increased likelihood of illicit drug use. Almost one third (31.3%) of heavy drinkers were also current illicit drug users. In comparison, among non-drinkers, only 3.4% were illicit drug users.

Cigarette use was most prevalent (36.2%) among people aged 18-25. Current smoking rates varied little by race/ethnicity.

Illicit drug use rates were higher among younger adults and males. The highest past month use rate (19.7%) was among people aged 18-25, and the lowest (4.6%) among people aged 35 and older. Current illicit drug use was more prevalent among males than females (10.4% vs. 5.8%). In terms of race/ethnicity, the rate of illicit drug use was highest among American Indian or Alaskan Native (12.6%) compared with 11.8% among those of two or more races, 9.5% of black respondents, 8.2% of white respondents, 6.6% of Hispanic or Latino respondents, and 4.8% of Asian respondents.

Looking at trends since 1979, use of any alcohol has declined over time. However, binge drinking rates have increased recently. Illicit drug use, marijuana use, and cigarette use rates have also decreased over time. See figure at left.



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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

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If you have questions, or would like to request copies of Research Update, please call 800-257-7800 ext. 4405, email butlerresearch@hazelden.org, or write BC 4, P.O. Box 11, Center City, MN 55012-0011.

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