

Drug, Alcohol and Tobacco Use Declines – American Secondary School Study

The annual *Monitoring the Future* student survey brings welcome news; rates of adolescent substance use are in decline. The study, conducted at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, has been tracking drug, tobacco, and alcohol use in youth for twenty eight years. The 2002 survey collected data from 44,000 students in grades 8, 10, and 12. Almost four hundred schools across the United States participated in this year's study. The survey, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, confirms that substance use among youth is *declining*.

Preceded by a rise in the number of youth who perceive ecstasy use as being dangerous, the rate of ecstasy use has declined in all three grade levels (8, 10, and 12) for all three prevalence periods measured (lifetime, annual, and past 30-day). The decrease in both annual and 30-day prevalence was statistically significant when all three grade levels were combined. This decrease in use is paralleled by an increase in perceived risk. When comparing the percentage of youth who responded that there was a great risk of harm associated with trying ecstasy, 38 percent of 12th graders agreed with this statement in 2000 versus 48 percent in 2001, and 52 percent in 2002. The study's principal investigator, Dr. Lloyd Johnston, cites the effects of media coverage of adverse events, as well as efforts by the National Institute on Drug Abuse to document and disseminate information on the harms of ecstasy use as factors that have led to changes in attitude and behaviour.

The proportion of youth reporting any illicit drug use in the last 12 months (annual prevalence) has also declined for all three grade levels. The decrease in annual prevalence was statistically significant for grades 8 and 10. The annual prevalence rate of students reporting illicit drug use for grades 8, 10, and 12 was 18 percent, 35 percent and 41 percent, respectively.

In addition, the 2002 survey demonstrates a decrease in current alcohol use among youth. The 30-day prevalence of alcohol use (any use in the last 30 days) among 8th grade students has dropped to 20 percent in 2002, down from a high of 26 percent in 1996; a statistically significant reduction. Among grade 10 students, the 30-day prevalence decreased from 39 percent in 2001 to 35 percent in 2002, also statistically significant. The proportion of students reporting that they were drunk at least once in the last 30-days was 7 percent, 18 percent, and 30 percent for grades 8, 10, and 12, respectively. These rates, compared to those in 2001, are all down by between 1 and 4 percentage points.

The sharp decline in youth tobacco use is probably the most notable finding in this year's survey. Following peak tobacco use rates in 1996, smoking among adolescents has fallen in 2002. Among grade 8 students, the percentage of current smoking (any use in the past 30 days) fell from 21 percent to 10.7 percent; current daily smoking fell from 10.4 percent to 5.1 percent and current half-pack-a-day smoking fell from 4.3 percent to 2.1 percent. In grade 10 students, rates have dropped by nearly half, and

among 12th graders rates are down between a quarter and a third. Attitudes about smoking have become much more negative in recent years. Approximately half of all students in all three grade levels are much less accepting of being around smokers. Furthermore, the proportion of students that prefer to date a non-smoker has also increased to 81 percent, 76 percent and 72 percent for grades 8, 10, and 12, respectively (up from 1996 results of 71 percent, 68 percent, and 64 percent respectively). Possible reasons for the marked reduction in tobacco use and the observed changes in attitudes include: increased tobacco prices; restricted tobacco advertising aimed at youth; increased anti-smoking advertisements; and more negative publicity about the tobacco industry.

Although these findings show tremendous promise, there is a need for continued and bolstered public education, treatment, prevention, and health promotion efforts. Those of us in the gambling field remain in desperate need of longitudinal data. Let us heed the lessons from past and current work and strengthen our efforts for the future.

The complete findings will be published in the forthcoming volume: Johnston, L.D., O'Malley, P.M., & Bachman, J.G. (2003). *Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2002*. Bethesda, M.D.: National Institute on Drug Abuse. For more information: www.monitoringthefuture.org