

Use of most drugs by American teens drops

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For the first time in more than four decades, the use of nearly all drugs has declined among American teenagers, according to an annual survey of students from grades 8 to 12.

“This year was maybe unique, I can’t recall another year in all these 42 years [of surveys] where nearly all the substances that we’re looking at — both legal and illegal — are showing declines,” said Lloyd Johnston, who has been the principal investigator of the *Monitoring The Future* survey since its inception in 1975.

The survey is carried out by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center and funded by the United States National Institute on Drug Abuse. In 2016, they surveyed about 45 000 students in grades eight, ten and 12 in 380 public and private secondary schools.

The 2016 survey indicated that the percentage of students using an illicit drug — other than marijuana — in the previous 12 months had decreased about 1% since the previous year. Among grade eight students, 5% had used illicit drugs, compared with 10% of those in grade ten and 14% in grade 12. This is a substantial decline since the last half of the 1990s, when rates reached 13%, 18% and 21%, respectively.

The results for marijuana use in the past thirty days were less consistent. Use dropped 1% among grade eight students to 9.4%, but increased 1.2% among grade-twelve students to 22.5% — the highest level recorded since the measurement began in 1991.

Perceived access to marijuana declined. In 1996, 54.8% of grade eight students said they could access marijuana if they wished; in 2016 that number dropped to 34.6%. “It’s possible that availability has contributed to the decline of marijuana use, especially in the younger ages,” Johnston said.

Johnston is concerned that the growing legalization of marijuana could boost the availability of the drug to students. During the US election, the drug was approved for



The notable exception to a drop in drug use was for marijuana. Grade 12 students’ use increased by 1.2% in 2016 to 22.5%.

recreational use in California, Nevada and Massachusetts. All told, 26 states and the District of Columbia now have laws legalizing marijuana in some form. Canada is poised to legalize the drug in 2017.

The use of prescription drugs for recreational purposes was only measured among grade 12 students. The results showed use in the previous 30 days decreased by 0.5% in 2016 to 5.4% versus the 8.6% first recorded in 2005. Johnston said this could be lower still if prescription practices changed. “Physicians and doctors should think about [how many tablets they are] putting in a prescription so that patients — especially adolescents — are not likely to have half a bottle left, sitting around and be tempted to use it,” he said.

This drop in prescription drug use, particularly opioids, may help reduce the threat of teens overdosing, said Johnston. “If they carry that pattern of abstinence into their 20s, that’s going to help to offset the epidemic we’ve been having.”

The use of regulated drugs, like cigarettes and alcohol, has also continued its downward slide. In the 2016 survey, 2.6% of grade eight students reported smoking cigarettes within the past 30 days, a decrease of 1% from 2015. Among grade 12 students, 10.5% reported smoking, a decrease of 0.9% from the year before. In 1997, 21% of grade eight students and 34% of grade 12 students had smoked in the previous 30 days.

In 1991, 54% of Grade 12 students had consumed alcohol in the last 30 days, compared with 33% in 2016. Alcohol use peaked among grade eight students in 1996 at 26%; the rate is now 7%.

“Since so many fewer kids are using the entry level drugs in the drug sequence, specifically cigarettes and alcohol, and to some degree also inhalants, it may be that fewer kids are moving on to the next steps in the sequence because they didn’t take the earlier stuff,” Johnston said.

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