

The NHSDA Report

January 16, 2003

Nonmedical Use of Prescription-Type Drugs among Youths and Young Adults

In Brief

- In 2001, almost 3 million youths aged 12 to 17 and almost 7 million young adults aged 18 to 25 had used prescription-type drugs nonmedically at least once in their lifetime
- Among persons aged 12 to 25, the rate of past year marijuana use was higher among those who had used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year (63 percent) than those who did not (17 percent)

The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) asks respondents aged 12 or older to report their most recent use of nonmedical prescription-type drugs, as well as their age at first use. Based on the responses to these questions, the prevalence of lifetime and past year use and the annual numbers of new (i.e., first-time) users are estimated. Use was defined as nonmedical if the drug was not prescribed for the respondent or if the respondent took the drug only for the experience or feeling it caused. Prescription-type drugs do not include over-the-counter drugs and are classified in four categories: pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives. Responses were analyzed by the type of county in which the respondents lived at the time of the interview.¹

Trends in Numbers of New Users

The NHSDA shows that the initiation of nonmedical prescription-type drug use occurs primarily among persons age 12 to 25,

and that new use has been increasing. The annual number of new users of pain relievers has been increasing since the mid-1980s, from about 400,000 initiates to 2 million in 2000 (Figure 1). New users of stimulants increased from more than 200,000 in 1991 to almost 700,000 in 2000. New users of tranquilizers have been increasing since the mid-1980s, but the largest increase has been recently, from more than 700,000 new users in 1999 to almost 1 million users in 2000. The number of new users of sedatives remained around 100,000 per year between 1988 and 1994. Starting in 1995, the number rose from 111,000 to 175,000 in 2000.

Between 1998 and 2000, there were more new users of pain relievers among 12 to 17 year olds than among 18 to 25 year olds. Between 1994 and 2000, there were more new users of stimulants among 12 to 17 year olds than among 18 to 25 year olds. The age distribution of new users of tranquilizers shifted in the 1990s; in 1990, about 15 percent of initiates were youths compared with about one third in the late 1990s.

Prevalence

In 2001, 36 million Americans (16 percent of persons aged 12 or older) had used prescription-type drugs nonmedically at least once in their lifetime. This included 9.6 million persons (18 percent) aged 12 to 25. In 2001, almost 3 million youths aged 12 to 17 (12 percent) and almost 7 million young adults aged 18 to 25 (23 percent) had used prescription-type drugs nonmedically at least once in their lifetime.

Of the estimated 11.1 million persons using prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year, nearly half (5.4 million) were aged 12 to 25. The rate of past year use among youths was 8 percent in 2001, up from 7 percent in 2000.

Figure 1. Annual Numbers of New Nonmedical Users of Prescription-Type Drugs, by Drug Category: 1965–2000

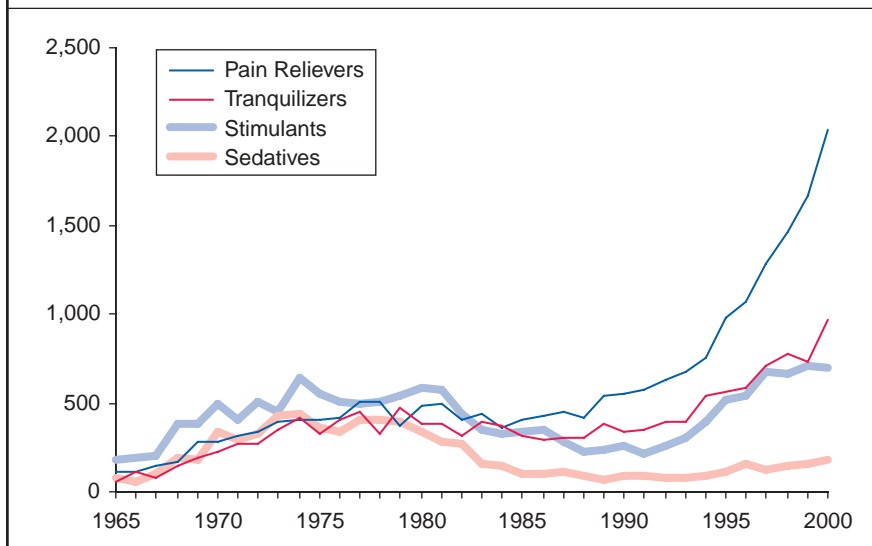
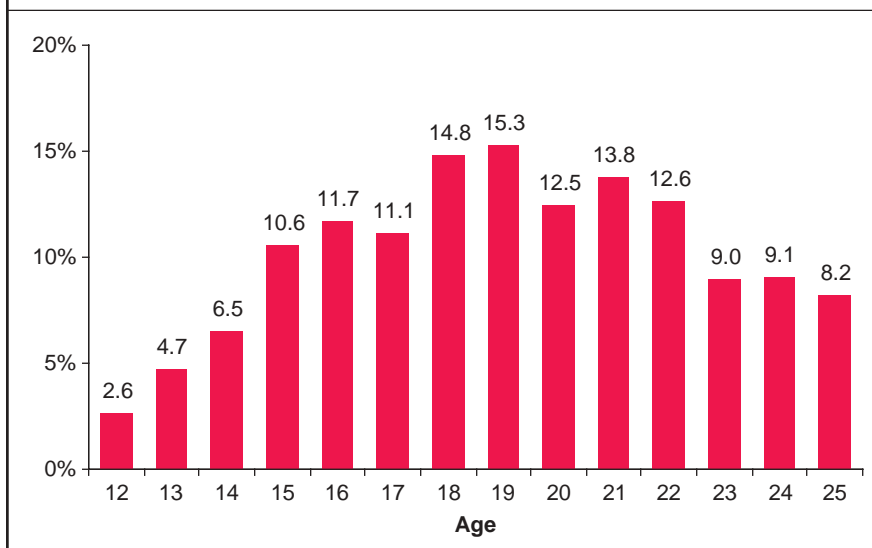


Figure 2. Percentages of Persons Aged 12 to 25 Reporting Past Year Nonmedical Use of Prescription-Type Drugs, by Age: 2001



Among young adults, the rate of past year use was 12 percent in 2001, up from 9 percent in 2000. The rate of past year nonmedical use of prescription-type drugs increased with age from 3 percent among 12 year olds to 15 percent among 18 and 19 year olds, then decreased to 8 percent among 25 year olds (Figure 2).

The most common category of prescription-type drugs used nonmedically by youths and young adults in the past year was pain

relievers (youths, 6 percent; young adults, 10 percent) (Figure 3). Pain relievers include codeine, methadone, meperidine (Demerol), Percocet, hydrocodone (Vicodin), and oxycodone (Oxycontin).

Among youths, females were more likely to have used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year (9 percent) than males (7 percent). However, among young adults, males were more likely to have used in the past year (14 percent) than females (10 percent).

Among persons aged 12 to 25, whites were more likely to have used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year than Hispanics, blacks, or Asians (whites, 12 percent; Hispanics, 8 percent; blacks, 6 percent; Asians, 5 percent).

Youths in non-metropolitan or small metropolitan areas were more likely to have used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year (9 percent) than youths in large metropolitan areas (7 percent). However, among young adults, the rate of past year nonmedical use of prescription-type drugs was similar among metropolitan and non-metropolitan county types.

Other Illicit Drug Use

Those youths and young adults who used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year had a higher rate of other illicit drug use in the past year as well (Figure 4). For example, 63 percent of youths and young adults who had used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year had also used marijuana in the past year compared with 17 percent of youths and young adults who had not used prescription-type drugs nonmedically in the past year.

End Notes

1. Large metropolitan areas have a population of 1 million or more. Small metropolitan areas have a population of fewer than 1 million. Non-metropolitan areas are outside metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), as defined by the Office of Management and Budget.

Figure Notes

Source (Figure 1): SAMHSA 1999-2001 NHSDAs. The 1999 number was estimated using 2000 and 2001 data only, and the 2000 number was estimated using 2001 data only.

Source (Figures 2-4): SAMHSA 2001 NHSDA.

Note: Nonmedical use of any prescription-type pain reliever, tranquilizer, stimulant, or sedative; does not include over-the-counter drugs.

Figure 3. Percentages of Persons Aged 12 to 25 Reporting Past Year Nonmedical Use of Prescription-Type Drugs, by Age Group and Drug Category: 2001

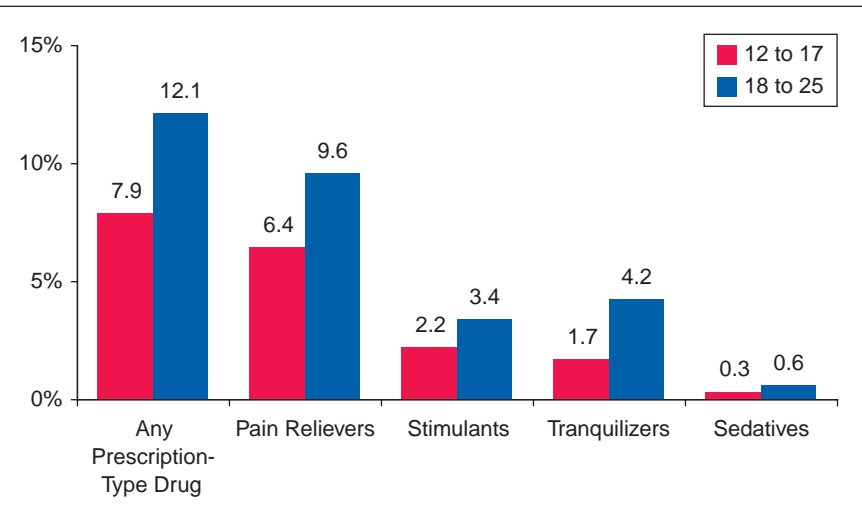
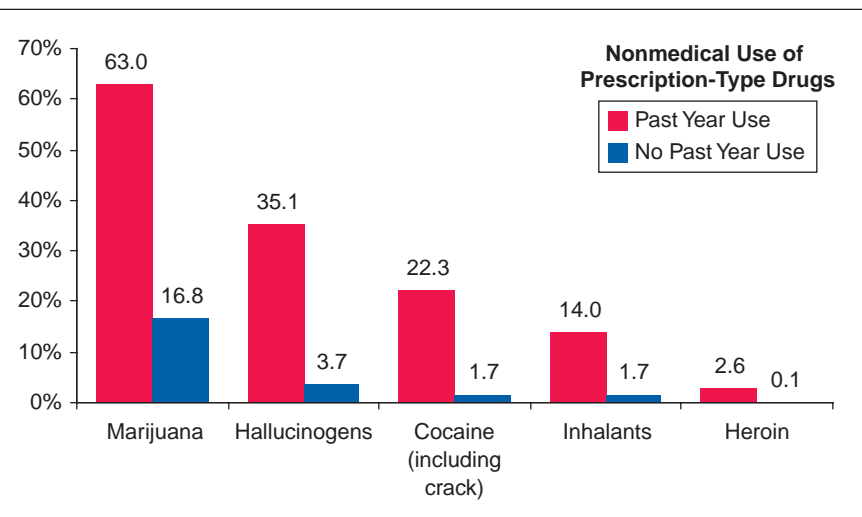


Figure 4. Percentages of Persons Aged 12 to 25 Reporting Past Year Use of Selected Illicit Drugs, by Nonmedical Use of Prescription-Type Drugs: 2001



The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The 2001 data are based on information obtained from 69,000 persons aged 12 or older, including more than 45,000 persons aged 12 to 25. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NHSDA Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Information and data for this issue are based on the following publication and statistics:

Office of Applied Studies. (2002). *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I. Summary of national findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 02-3758, NHSDA Series H-17). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available on-line: <http://www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov>.

Additional tables available upon request.

