

The NSDUH Report

November 10, 2005

Substance Use, Dependence, and Treatment among Veterans

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) projects the need for substance abuse treatment services using data on the subset of veterans who seek treatment in the VA Health System each year. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) represents an opportunity to enhance these projections by examining

epidemiological data on the veteran population, including those who previously have not accessed VA services.

This report provides estimates of substance use, dependence, and treatment for the year 2003 derived from a logistic regression model¹ in which 2000–2003 NSDUH data were pooled to provide more precise measures of differences between veterans and a nonveteran comparison group. To make valid comparisons, a “standardized” nonveteran group was constructed by adjusting the weights of the NSDUH sample to reflect the age, gender, and geographic distribution of veterans as observed in benefit eligibility data collected by the Veterans Health Administration.

NSDUH asks persons aged 12 or older to report on their use of alcohol and illicit drugs, as well as their symptoms of substance dependence or abuse during the past year. NSDUH defines *any illicit drug* as marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens, heroin, or prescription-type drugs used nonmedically.² Respondents are asked about their use of alcohol. Heavy alcohol use is defined as

In Brief

- In 2003, an estimated 3.5 percent of veterans used marijuana in the past month compared with 3.0 percent of their nonveteran counterparts
- Past month heavy use of alcohol was more prevalent among veterans (7.5 percent) than comparable nonveterans (6.5 percent)
- An estimated 0.8 percent of veterans received specialty treatment for a substance use disorder (alcohol or illicit drugs) in the past year compared with 0.5 percent of comparable nonveterans

drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days.

NSDUH defines dependence on or abuse of illicit drugs or alcohol using criteria specified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*.³ Substance dependence or abuse includes such symptoms as withdrawal, tolerance, use in dangerous situations, trouble with the law, and interference in major obligations at work, school, or home during the past year.

Respondents also were asked about veteran status. A veteran is defined as an individual who formerly served in any of the U.S. Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, etc.).

Veteran Characteristics

In 2003, there were an estimated 25 million veterans comprising roughly 11.5 percent of the 217 million non-institutionalized civilians aged 17 or older in the United States. Approximately 93 percent of veterans were male, and 8.4 percent were between the ages of 17 and 34. An estimated 30.1 percent were between the ages of 35 and 54, 42.3 percent were between the ages of 55 and 74, and 19.2 percent were aged 75 or older.

Illicit Drug and Heavy Alcohol Use

An estimated 3.5 percent of veterans used marijuana in the past month compared with 3.0 percent of their nonveteran counterparts in 2003 (Figure 1). Among both groups, heavy use of alcohol was more common than illicit drug use.

Figure 1. Model-Based Prevalence Estimates of Past Month Heavy Alcohol Use, Marijuana Use, and Illicit Drug Use Other Than Marijuana among Persons Aged 17 or Older, by Veteran Status: 2003

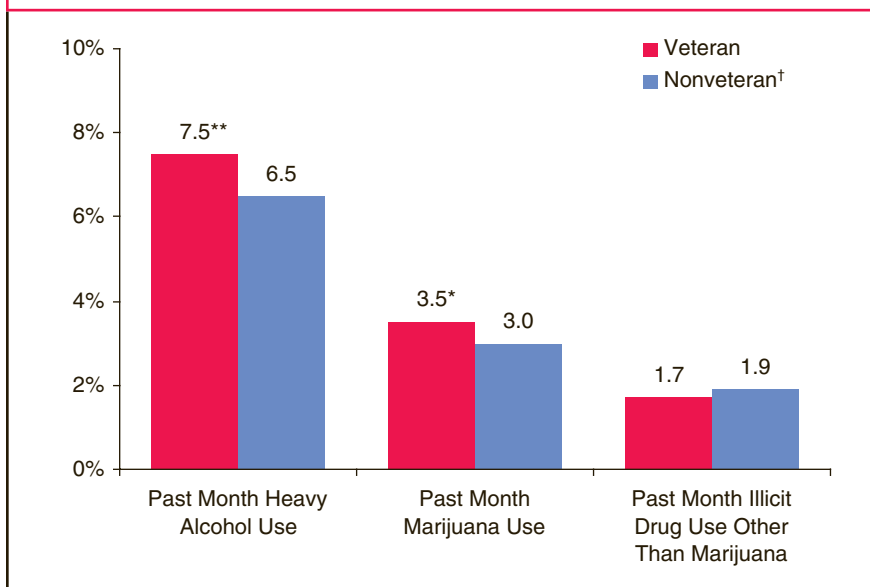
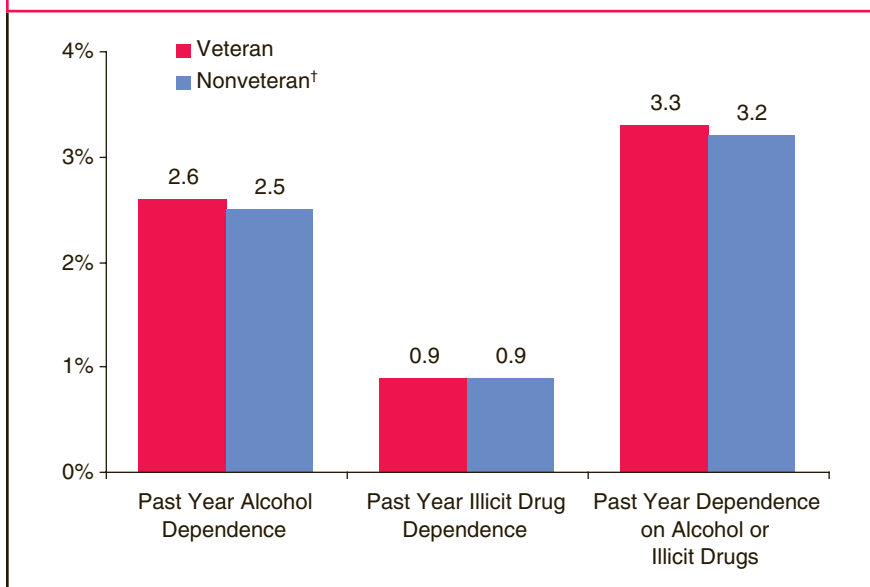


Figure 2. Model-Based Prevalence Estimates of Past Year Illicit Drug and Alcohol Dependence among Persons Aged 17 or Older, by Veteran Status: 2003

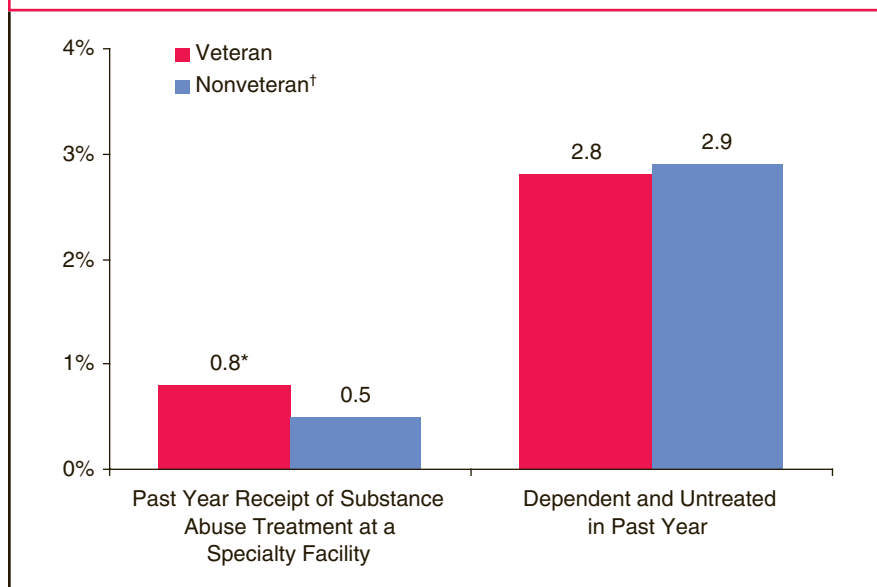


Heavy use of alcohol was more prevalent among veterans than comparable nonveterans, with an estimated 7.5 percent of veterans drinking heavily in the past month compared with 6.5 percent of their nonveteran counterparts.

Dependence on Illicit Drugs and Alcohol

Using criteria from the DSM-IV, an estimated 2.6 percent of veterans were dependent on alcohol in the past year (Figure 2). A much smaller proportion of veterans

Figure 3. Model-Based Prevalence Estimates of Past Year Receipt of Specialty Treatment and Unmet Need for Treatment among Persons Aged 17 or Older, by Veteran Status: 2003



(0.9 percent) was dependent on illicit drugs in the past year. Estimated rates of dependence among comparable nonveterans on alcohol and illicit drugs were comparable with rates among veterans.

Treatment for Substance Use Disorders

An estimated 0.8 percent of veterans received specialty

treatment⁴ for a substance use disorder (alcohol or illicit drugs) in the past year compared with 0.5 percent of their nonveteran counterparts (Figure 3). An estimated 2.8 percent of veterans were dependent on illicit drugs or alcohol but did not receive treatment in the past year.⁵ A similar proportion of comparable nonveterans went untreated.

End Notes

- Long, J. S. (1997). *Regression models for categorical and limited dependent variables* (No. 7, Advanced Quantitative Techniques in the Social Sciences). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Logistic regression models included calendar year and veteran status indicators, and were estimated using the SUDAAN[®] software's R-LOGISTIC procedure to account for NSDUH's complex survey design.
- NSDUH measures the nonmedical use of prescription-type pain relievers, sedatives, stimulants, or tranquilizers. Nonmedical use is defined as the use of prescription-type drugs not prescribed for the respondent by a physician or used only for the experience or feeling they caused. Nonmedical use of any prescription-type pain reliever, sedative, stimulant, or tranquilizer does not include over-the-counter drugs.
- American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Specialty treatment is defined as treatment received at a hospital (inpatient), rehabilitation facility (inpatient or outpatient), or mental health center to reduce or stop drug or alcohol use, or medical problems associated with drug or alcohol use.
- Respondents were classified as having an unmet need for substance use treatment if they were dependent on illicit drugs or alcohol and did not receive treatment at a specialty facility.

Figure Notes

Source: SAMHSA, 2003 NSDUH.

- * Difference between veteran and comparable nonveteran samples significant at $p < .05$.
- ** Difference between veteran and comparable nonveteran samples significant at $p < .01$.
- † Estimates standardized to match veteran demographic distribution by age, gender, and region.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Prior to 2002, this survey was called the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA). The results presented here are based on an analysis of information obtained from 12,072 veterans and 184,339 nonveterans aged 17 or older who were surveyed in 2000 through 2003.

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 NSDUH Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. (RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.)

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

Office of Applied Studies. (2004). *Results from the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 04-3964, NSDUH Series H-25). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Office of Applied Studies. (2003). *Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA

03-3836, NSDUH Series H-22). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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.

Office of Applied Studies. (2001). *Summary of findings from the 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 01-3549, NHSDA Series H-13). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available online: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov>

Because of improvements and modifications to the 2002 NSDUH, estimates from the 2002, 2003, and 2004 surveys should not be compared with estimates from the 2001 or earlier versions of the survey to examine changes over time.

