

The NHSDA Report

August 1, 2003

Comparison of Substance Use in Australia and the United States

In Brief

- First use of alcohol and most illicit drugs was earlier for US users than for Australian users
- In both countries, the past year use of alcohol was similar for male and female youths aged 14 to 19
- In Australia, past year use of any illicit drug was highest for persons in their twenties but in the US past year use was highest for teenagers

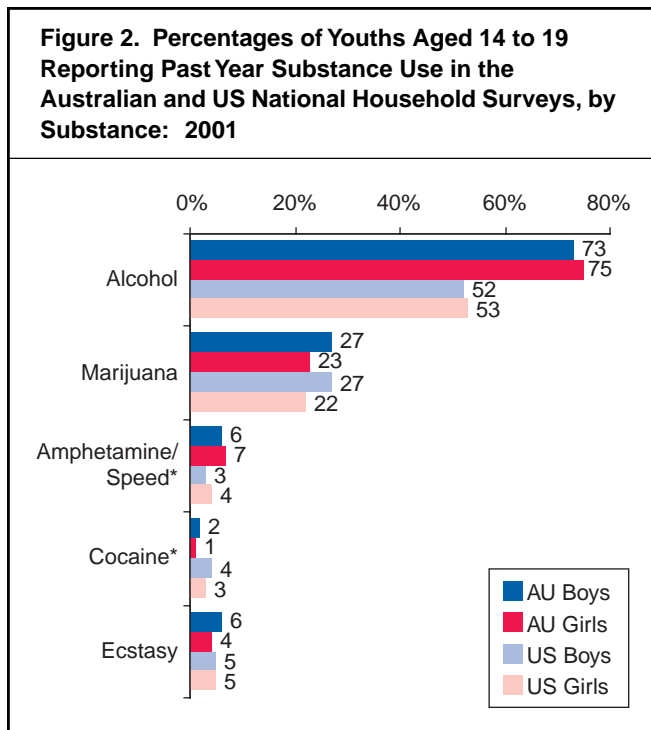
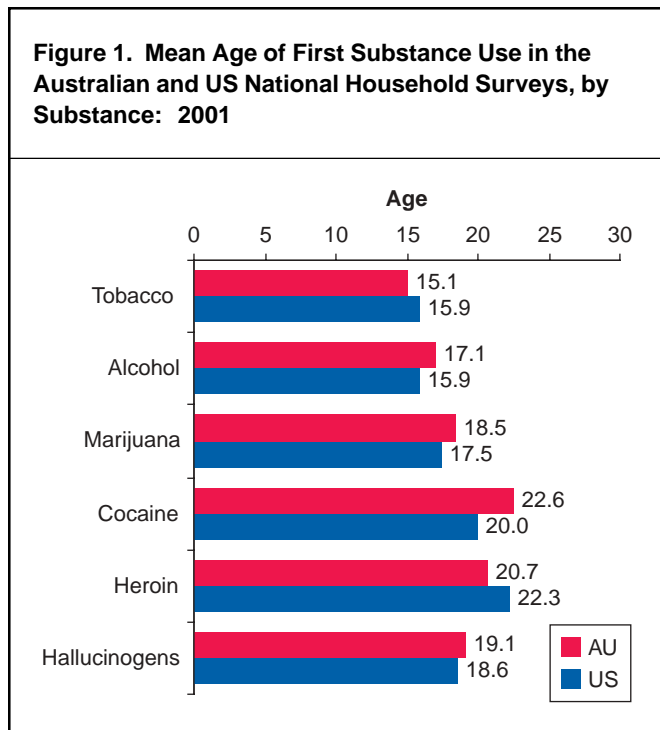
Between 1998 and 2001, past year use of “any illicit drug” in Australia decreased, while lifetime and past year use between 2000 and 2001 in the US increased. Marijuana continues to be the illicit drug most often used in both countries, with more use of tobacco in the US and alcohol in Australia. While cocaine use is higher in the US, use of stimulants such as methamphetamine is more prevalent in Australia.

Age of Initiation for Alcohol and Drug Use

First use of alcohol was earlier for US users even though legal drinking age in the US is 21, as compared to 18 in Australia (Figure 1). The first use of most drugs was also earlier for US users compared with Australian users.

Gender Differences

Teenaged girls aged 14 to 19 in both countries are using alcohol and drugs such as amphetamines/speed at rates similar to or higher than boys (Figure 2). However, in



both countries, teenaged boys are more likely to have used marijuana in the past year than teenaged girls.

Over 20 percent of teens aged 14 to 19 reported binge drinking in the past year. In both countries, there was no significant difference between teenaged boys and girls in past year use of alcohol and there was also no difference between Australian boys and girls in their levels of binge or heavy alcohol use (Figure 3). There was also no difference in levels of lifetime and past-year use of any illicit drug for Australian males and females aged 60 and older or for past-year illicit drug use by US males and females in their fifties and sixties.

Lifetime and Past Year Illicit Drug Use

Prevalence of illicit drug use by age groups differed in the two surveys (Figure 4). In Australia, past year and lifetime use of any illicit drug was highest for persons in their twenties, while in the US, past year

use was highest for teenagers and levels of lifetime use were similar for people in their twenties (55 percent), thirties (57 percent), and forties (57 percent), followed by teenagers (42 percent) and persons in their fifties (37 percent). This pattern of lifetime use means treatment and health care services are needed not only for young persons, but also for aging users and former users.

Survey Descriptions

The 2001 Australian (AU) Drug Strategy National Household Survey, a multistage area probability sample of 26,744 persons aged 14 and over living in households, was conducted July through November, 2001, using a computer-assisted telephone interview method to supplement the drop-and-collect¹ and the face-to-face methods. The wording of lifetime questions changed from 1998 so differences in lifetime prevalence between 1998 and 2001 cannot be tested for significance.

The 2001 US National House-

hold Survey on Drug Abuse, a multistage area probability sample of 68,929 persons aged 12 and older living in households, was conducted January through December, 2001, using an in-person interview with computer-assisted personal interviewing. Because of the shift from pencil and paper format in 1998 to computer format in 1999, the changes in prevalence from 1998 to 2001 cannot be compared. The US prevalence rates were recalculated to reflect the same age categories as in the 2001 Australian survey.

Because of the differences in the instruments, sampling, and interviewing methods between the US and Australian surveys, no statistical comparisons can be made between the prevalence rates of the two countries.

End Note

¹ Data were collected from a national random selection of households which returned self-completion booklets. One attempt was made by the interviewer to personally collect the completed questionnaire; if collection was not possible at this time, a reply-paid pre-

Figure 3. Percentages of Youths Aged 14 to 19 Reporting Past Month, Monthly Binge, and Weekly Binge Alcohol Use in the Australian and US National Household Surveys: 2001

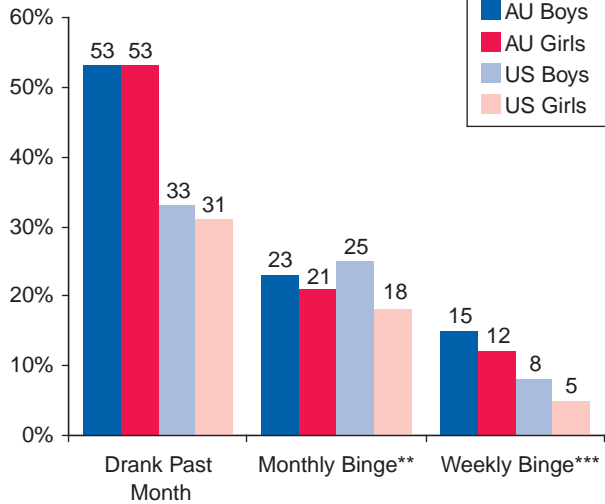


Figure 4. Percentages of Persons Aged 14 or Older Reporting Lifetime and Past Year Use of Any Illicit Drug in the Australian and US National Household Surveys, by Age Group: 2001

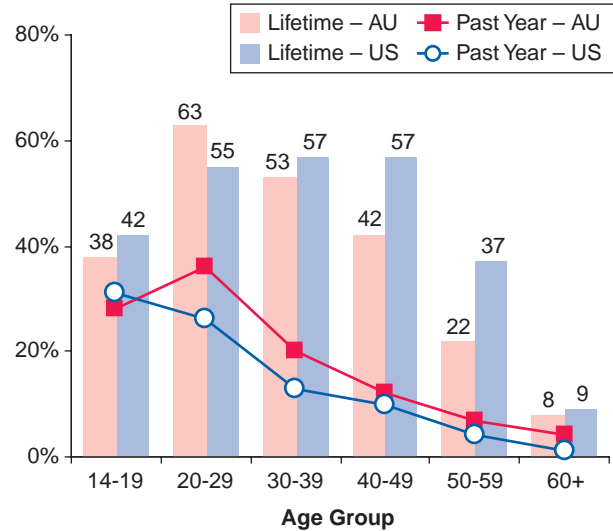


Table 1. Lifetime and Past Year Substance Use in the Australian and US National Household Surveys, by Substance: 2001

	Lifetime		Past Year	
	AU	US	AU	US
Tobacco	49.4	69.1	23.2	29.8
Alcohol	90.4	84.0	82.4	65.5
Any Illicit Drug	37.7	42.8	16.9	12.7
Marijuana	33.1	38.1	12.9	9.6
Stimulants	8.9	7.3	3.4	1.1
Cocaine	4.4	12.7	1.3	1.9
Hallucinogens	7.6	12.9	1.1	2.1
Ecstasy	6.1	3.7	2.9	1.5
Tranquilizers	3.2	6.4	1.1	1.7
Barbiturates/Sedatives	0.9	3.4	0.2	0.4
Heroin	1.6	1.4	0.2	0.2
Inhalants	2.6	8.1	0.4	0.8
Pain-killers/Analgesics	6.0	10.0	3.1	3.7
Injected Illicit Drugs	1.8	1.5	0.6	0.2

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. 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 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDS) is managed under the direction of the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS), which comprises ministers for health and law enforcement from the Commonwealth Government and State and Territory Governments. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is Australia's national health and welfare statistics and information agency. The Institute's mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians by informing community discussion and decision making through national leadership in developing and providing health and welfare statistics and information. The 2001 data are based on almost 27,000 people aged 14 years and older. It provides comprehensive information on tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use patterns, community perceptions of drug use, support for drug-related policy and legislation, and drug use among special population groups. Previous surveys were conducted in 1985, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995 and 1998.

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 publications:

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.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2002). *2001 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: detailed findings*. AIHW cat. no. PHE 41. Canberra: AIHW (Drug Statistics Series No.11).

For a more detailed analysis, see Maxwell, J.C. (in press). Update: Comparison of drug use in Australia and the United States as seen in the 2001 National Household Surveys, *Drug and Alcohol Review*.



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addressed envelope was provided.

Figure and Table Notes

- * Difference between US male and female estimates is significant.
- ** Binge drinking is 5 or more drinks on one occasion in past month.
- ***Weekly binge in AU is 5 or more drinks at least weekly; in the US, it is "heavy drinking," which is 5 or more drinks on each of 5 or more days in the past month.