Teen Marijuana Use Up Slightly, Meth Use Down

BY ALICIA AULT

WASHINGTON — The number of teenagers reporting marijuana use is up slightly over the last 2 years, along with the proportion of those reporting any illicit drug use, according to the biannual Monitoring the Future survey, conducted for the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The survey queries 8th, 10th, and 12th graders about drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, and about attitudes and behaviors. This year, 46,097 students from 389 public and private schools participated in the survey, conducted by the University of Michigan.

The increase in illicit drug use was largely accounted for by the rise in use of marijuana, the most widely used drug, at 33% of 12th graders, said Lloyd Johnston, Ph.D., lead author of the survey and a research professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor. Alcohol is the most widely used substance; 66% of 12th graders said they'd used alcohol in the previous year.

Dr. Johnston, joined by NIDA director Nora Volkow and White House Office of National Drug Control Policy director R. Gil Kerlikowske, said the report contained both good and bad news.

"We are containing the drug use problem among America's young people," Mr. Kerlikowske said. But "is containment really what we're after? I would argue that certainly, it is not."

As for the good news, the number of high school seniors who reported methamphetamine use in the past year was 1.2%, the lowest since teens were first asked about the drug in 1999. Cigarette smoking also was at an all-time low among the 8th, 10th, and 12th graders surveyed. A total of 11% percent of high school seniors said they smoked daily, which is half the peak rate of 25% in 1997.

Seniors also reported declining use of hallucinogens—particularly LSD—and cocaine. Younger students said it was harder to access cocaine, sedatives, heroin, and crystal methamphetamine. They also had an increased perception that LSD, amphetamines, sedatives, heroin, and cocaine were dangerous. Attitudes about harmfulness generally portend future use trends, Mr. Kerlikowske said.

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That connection might be at work when it comes to marijuana use, Dr. Johnston said. Marijuana rates stayed steady for most of the last 5 years but had a slight uptick each of the last 2 years. Meanwhile, over the same period, the number of 8th graders who reported that marijuana use was harmful fell from 76% to 70%. Fewer teenagers report personal disapproval of marijuana.

However, teens who use marijuana do not necessarily go on to use other drugs. That's shown by the decline in use figures for many other drug classes, Dr. Johnston said.

The drug researchers said they were concerned about prescription drug abuse, which is still at peak levels. A total of 10% of seniors reported Vicodin use in the last 12 months, and 6% reported using amphetamines and tranquilizers. About 5% of 10th and 12th graders said they'd used OxyContin; that is a slight increase at the 10th-grade level.

Dr. Johnston and the others also noted the continued level use of cough syrups by about 6% of teens, and the abuse of Adderall, a stimulant prescribed for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. It is the first year that survey participants have been asked about Adderall; it is possibly being used as a substitute for Ritalin, a stimulant whose use declined from 5% of 12th graders in 2001 to 2% in 2009.

Alcohol use leveled off among 10th and 12th graders, after a long decline, but still decreased among 8th graders. Even so, binge drinking, especially "excessive" binge drinking, continues to be an issue, Dr. Johnston said. ■