



Youth Drug Use: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Posted by Director R. Gil Kerlikowske on January 11, 2012 at 2:41 PM EST

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Recently, I joined officials from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the Department of Health and Human Services to announce the results of the largest annual survey on youth drug use in America. NIDA's annual "[Monitoring the Future](#)" study, which questions more than 46,000 teens in over 400 public and private schools across America, is a vital source of information about the types of substances young people are using, as well as their attitudes and perceptions regarding substance use -- including alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

This year's data revealed some troubling new trends, including startling new information showing an [emerging threat](#) of so-called "synthetic drugs," which have been marketed as "legal" alternatives to marijuana. According to the survey, one in nine high school seniors has used synthetic marijuana marketed as "K2" and "spice" in the past year. That means the use of these drugs now rank as the second most frequently used illegal drug among high school seniors, second only to marijuana.

To address this emerging challenge, the Drug Enforcement Administration recently used their emergency regulatory authority to [temporarily ban](#) the sale of the chemicals used to manufacture K2 and spice. I have also convened officials from across the federal government at the White House to share data and coordinate a federal response to the threat of synthetic drugs. We are also working with Congress; and just two weeks ago the House of Representatives [passed legislation](#) that would permanently ban the chemicals used to make synthetic drugs, including those marketed as "bath salts."

New data also shows that youth marijuana use is on the rise. In fact, more high school 10th graders smoke marijuana than smoke cigarettes. Making matters worse, young people's perception of harm regarding marijuana use is declining. Unfortunately, the barrage of mixed media messages and legalization campaigns that seek to normalize drug use [shape young people's attitudes](#) toward drug use. Let's keep this in mind: Using illegal drugs is not part of everyday life in America, nor is it a rite of passage. Given the wide array of public health research outlining [the serious consequences](#) of using marijuana, we must work to ensure teens understand that marijuana use can harm a young person's health and his or her future.

Despite these challenges, this year's survey also contains some very [promising trends](#). Rates of drug use among young people are far lower than they were 30 years ago. And while still far too high (alcohol is still the most widely abused drug among teens), rates of teen cigarette smoking and drinking are at the [lowest levels](#) ever measured. Moreover, far more teens disapprove of smoking today than they did 20 years ago.

This progress didn't happen overnight or by accident. Over the past several decades, a concerted effort by parents, the private sector, and public health and safety institutions was mounted to keep young people healthy and protected from harmful substances through a balanced combination of education, treatment and enforcement. Nationwide [media campaigns](#) have encouraged young people to make healthy choices by rejecting drug use. Local [community coalitions](#) have formed across the nation to address local threats with local solutions. Law enforcement agencies have [targeted the supply](#) of substances, making them expensive and less available to teens. Not only have these efforts substantially reduced the number of young people hurt by drugs, but they have also changed the culture surrounding these substances. This is important because when society disapproves of drug use, and its harms are accurately and frequently communicated to young people, fewer will begin using drugs. For example, the rate of smoking [goes down](#) when the acceptability of smoking goes down. The percentage of students reporting daily cigarette use is significantly lower, along with the percentage of students who think smoking is acceptable.

Preventing drug use before it ever begins is, after all, the [most cost-effective](#) way to address our drug problem. Successful prevention means fewer people will develop substance use disorders, and the consequences of substance use -- including health care, treatment costs and criminal justice system costs -- will all decrease.

The Obama administration has taken a [comprehensive approach](#) to the substance abuse problem, and science directs that effort. Research shows time and again that adult influencers are the most powerful force in the lives of young people. We will continue working with local communities to decrease substance use rates across the nation. In the meantime, we hope you will join us in making America healthier and safer.

For more information or help on how to talk to teens about drugs, visit TheAntiDrug.com.

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