



# OJJDP FACT SHEET

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## Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem

by Nels Ericson

Research has long shown that the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs is the single most serious health problem in the United States, straining the health care system, burdening the economy, and contributing to the health problems and death of millions of Americans every year. Today, substance abuse causes more deaths, illnesses, and disabilities than any other preventable health condition.

A new report, *Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem*, commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and prepared by the Schneider Institute for Health Policy at Brandeis University, tracks positive and negative trends in adult and youth smoking, drinking, and illicit drug use over the past three decades. The report contains data from several hundred public and private sources, reporting snapshots and long-term trends in patterns of adult and youth substance abuse, consequences to society, and approaches for combating the problem. Among other findings, the report discusses the role the media have played in influencing youth substance use and looks at how treatment, though shown to be effective by numerous scientific studies, is severely underutilized.

### Research Findings

The findings of the report show that juveniles are experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco at young ages. Indeed, the data show that attitudes toward drug use and patterns of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use are often established early in life. The research suggests that significant changes in drug awareness take place between the ages of 12 and 13. Thirteen-year-olds are three times more likely to know how to obtain marijuana or to know someone who uses illicit drugs than are 12-year-olds. Young adults (ages 18–25) are most likely to engage in heavy use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco than all other age groups. Other research findings are discussed below.

### Long-Term Implications of Early Substance Use

By the eighth grade, 52 percent of adolescents have consumed alcohol, 41 percent have smoked cigarettes, and 20 percent have

used marijuana. By the 12th grade, about 80 percent have used alcohol, 63 percent have smoked cigarettes, and 49 percent have used marijuana. Young people account for the majority of new users of many substances. The rising prevalence of marijuana use during the first half of the 1990s was driven, in large part, by the increasing rates of new use among youth ages 12–17. Between 1990 and 1997, declines in the mean age of first use of cocaine and heroin were accompanied by an upward trend in the rate of new cocaine and heroin users among 12- to 17-year-olds. Tobacco use among adolescents, research shows, is a powerful predictor of other drug use, especially among females. For adolescent males, alcohol use is a strong predictor of progression into the use of other drugs. The age when adolescents first start using alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs is also a reliable predictor of later alcohol and drug problems, especially if that use begins before age 15. More than 40 percent of youth who start drinking at age 14 or younger develop alcohol dependence, compared with 10 percent of youth who begin drinking at age 20 or older.

### Role of the Media

The media play a critical role in shaping perceptions about the risks of substance use. Increases in substance use among youth between the early 1990s and 1996 were linked to a decline in the prevalence of warning and antidrug messages from the media, parents, and schools; the proliferation of pro-use messages from the entertainment industry; and high levels of tobacco and alcohol product advertising and promotion. Media research<sup>1</sup> shows that in the 200 most popular movie rentals in 1996 and 1997, alcohol appeared in 93 percent, tobacco in 89 percent, and illicit drugs in 22 percent, with marijuana and cocaine depicted most often. Analysis of the 1,000 most popular songs of 1996 and 1997 showed that 27 percent referred to either alcohol or illicit drugs. In 1999, 44 percent of non-news programs aired by the four

<sup>1</sup> Roberts, D.F., Henricksen, C., and Christiansson, P.G. 1999. *Substance Use in Popular Movies and Music*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, and Office of National Drug Control Policy.

major television networks portrayed tobacco use in at least one episode. In 1998, the tobacco industry spent \$6.7 billion on advertising and product promotions, and the alcohol industry spent more than \$1 billion on television, radio, print, and outdoor advertising in 1997.

### Underutilization of Proven Treatment Options

Research also shows that only a quarter of individuals who abuse alcohol and illicit drugs get treatment. Recent studies have shown that after 6 months, treatment for alcoholism is successful for 40 to 70 percent of patients, cocaine treatment is successful for 50 to 60 percent, and opiate treatment is successful for 50 to 80 percent, with effectiveness defined as a 50-percent reduction in substance use after 6 months. This research also shows that treatment, even treatment for relapses into substance abuse, is less expensive than incarceration and untreated addiction.

Substance abuse can have an effect from earliest infancy to old age. Some infants are born already affected by the substances consumed by their mothers during pregnancy. Prenatal exposure to alcohol, drugs, or tobacco in utero has been linked to psychological, cognitive, and physical problems in children. More than 2,000 infants are born every year in the United States with fetal alcohol syndrome, a group of preventable birth defects and developmental disabilities caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy. More than 6,000 children die each year of sudden

infant death syndrome and respiratory infections linked to parental smoking and low birth weights associated with a mother's smoking during pregnancy. Children can be affected by their parents' substance abuse in a number of ways: from neglect and abuse associated with alcohol and use of illicit drugs to chronic respiratory problems caused by environmental tobacco smoke.

### For Further Information

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, NJ, is the Nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. To obtain a copy of the report *Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem*, write to:

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Attn: Substance Abuse Chartbook  
Route 1 and College Road East  
P.O. Box 2316  
Princeton, NJ 08543-2316  
Internet: [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org), under the Resource Centers section.

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*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

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