Drug Use Among America’s Teenagers

By Lauren Gilmore

A survey has reported a significant decrease and leveling off in teens’ illicit drug use. The Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, along with the Monitoring the Future Study, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, conducted the survey with a population of nearly 50,000 students. They surveyed an equal number of male and female subjects, in grades eight, ten, and twelve at more than 420 public and private schools in the United States. The survey inquired about substance abuse, frequency/duration of use, and associated risks. The results reported a significant decrease and leveling off in teens’ illicit drug use.

Questions were asked about substances such as marijuana, hallucinogens, heroin, stimulants, crack/cocaine, and inhalants. Researchers found that marijuana usage decreased in all three age populations, which counted for the majority of the overall decline in drug use in 1998. Twenty-two percent of eighth graders and close to half of the twelfth-graders reported that they had experimented with marijuana, and the awareness of risks involved had increased among eighth-graders. The use of stimulants decreased for the second year in a row to 7.2 percent among eighth-graders, 10.7 percent among tenth-graders, and remained close to the same as the previous year for twelfth-graders, at 10.1 percent. There was a slight decline in hallucinogenic use at all levels -- to 3.4 percent for eighth-graders, 6.9 percent for tenth-graders, and 9.0 percent for twelfth-graders. Inhalant use decreased as well at 11.1 percent for eighth-graders, 8.0 percent for tenth-graders, and 6.2 percent for twelfth-graders. Heroin use did not decrease and remained the same in all grades, but the perceived risk and awareness among students increased. In 1998, heroin usage was 1.3 percent for eighth-graders, 1.4
percent for tenth-graders, and 1.0 percent for twelfth-graders. Unfortunately, there was
an increase in usage of crack/cocaine, reaching its highest level -- 2.1 percent for eighth-
graders and 2.5 percent for tenth-graders and twelfth-graders.

Dr. Alan I. Leshner believes there are a few contributing factors to this decrease
in substance abuse among students. He believes that because scientific research has
enhanced our understanding of addiction, more preventive measures and treatment
alternatives have become available. In addition, educational efforts are proving to be
successful and students are able to make more educated decisions.

The study also produced results that suggest gender differences in substance
abuse. A higher percentage of males are more likely to use illicit drugs than are females.
The exception is among young girls who are more likely to use illicit substances other
than marijuana, mainly due to a greater use of tranquilizers and stimulants. Overall, 12.1
percent of eighth-grade girls and 9.6 percent of boys reported using drugs other than
marijuana. Among tenth-graders, 17.5 percent of girls and 15.6 percent of boys reported
using drugs other than marijuana. Among twelfth-graders, 21.7 percent of boys and 18.0
percent of girls reported using drugs other than marijuana.

It is suggested that if more effort is put towards education and awareness, then
perhaps this downward trend of substance abuse will continue. Education has shown to
be one of the most effective preventive measures in the war against drugs.

For further information regarding this article please contact the Maternal
Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine,
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory West Campus, 1256 Briarcliff
Road N.E., Suite 323-West, Atlanta GA, 30306. You can email us at
msacd@listserv.cc.emory.edu, visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD, or phone us at 404-712-9800.

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases.

References: