

Drug Use Among American Youth, 1975-79

Patrick M. O'Malley, Lloyd D. Johnston, and
Jerald G. Bachman
Survey Research Center
The University of Michigan

Exactly five years ago, *Economic Outlook USA* published a report based on the first data collection by the Monitoring the Future project. In this report, we present findings from the first five years of the project, covering the period from 1975 through 1979.¹

Monitoring the Future – An Annual Survey of Youth

Each year since 1975, Monitoring the Future has surveyed approximately 17,000 seniors located in 130 high schools throughout the U.S. Each year's sample is drawn to be nationally representative of seniors in both public and private high schools. In the surveys, which are sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, students are asked about their own use of various drugs, licit and illicit, their attitudes and beliefs about these drugs, and a great variety of other questions dealing with more general values, attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles.

Earlier Findings

The earlier report compared national drug use rates by high school seniors as of 1975 with rates reported in a previous study which had been conducted in 1969. The data showed a substantial rise in the use of several illicit drugs, particularly marijuana, between 1969 and 1975. The authors also pointed to figures which indicated that alcohol use constituted a serious drug abuse problem for many young people of high school age. On the brighter side, there was considerable conservatism expressed about the use of illicit drugs other than marijuana.² Data collected during the last 5 years reveal changes in the patterns of drug use which have developed since the 1975 report.

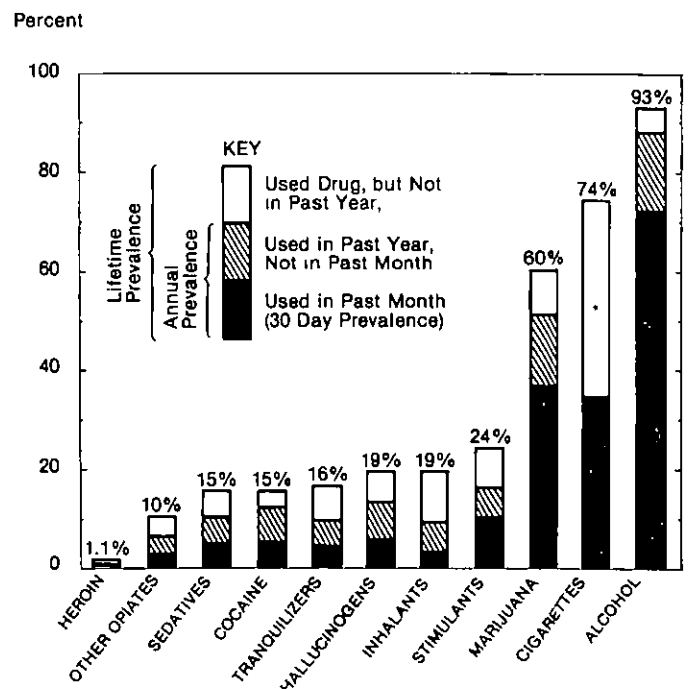
Prevalence

Chart 1 presents the data on prevalence and recency of use of 11 classes of drugs for the high school class of 1979. Data are shown for lifetime use, use during the past year, and use during the past month. Clearly, the most popular drugs are alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana. Nearly everyone has tried alcohol (93 percent), three-quarters have smoked a cigarette, and the majority have tried mari-

juana (60 percent). There is a sharp drop down to the next most popular drug class, stimulants, which have been tried by about one student in four (24 percent). Prevalence rates for the other illicit drugs range from 19 percent (inhalants and hallucinogens) to 10 percent (opiates other than heroin), except for heroin, which has been tried by only about one in 100 students.

Use in the past month parallels lifetime prevalence (at a lower level, of course), with a few interesting exceptions. Less than one-half of those who had ever smoked a cigarette had done so in the past month, but considerably more than half of the marijuana users had done so. As a result, more seniors had smoked some marijuana in the past month than had smoked tobacco (37 percent vs. 34 percent). Recent use of inhalants is relatively low, because much of the use of inhalants occurs at younger ages and is discontinued prior to senior year. Tranquilizers also show a relatively low rate of recent use. Cocaine, on the other hand, shows a relatively high rate of recent use, presumably because this drug has been increasing in popularity during the last few years.

Chart 1. PREVALENCE AND RECENTY OF USE, ELEVEN TYPES OF DRUGS, CLASS OF 1979



¹A more detailed report of the results of these surveys appears in *Drugs and the Nation's High School Students: Five Year National Trends, 1979 Highlights*. This report can be ordered without cost from the National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information, National Institute on Drug Abuse, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857.

²J.G. Bachman and L.D. Johnston, "Drug Use Among American Youth," *Economic Outlook USA* 3, Spring 1976: 32-33.

Trends in Use for Males and Females

Chart 2 shows trends from 1975 to 1979 in annual prevalence of eight illicit drugs, separately for males and females. Except for tranquilizers and stimulants, annual use of these drugs by males has been and continues to be higher than use by females. Trend lines for use of heroin and opiates other than heroin are essentially flat. Inhalants, cocaine, and stimulants show rises in annual use rates. The rise in cocaine use is particularly dramatic, with overall annual prevalence going from 5.6 percent in 1975 to 12.0 percent in 1979. Use of hallucinogens, after a drop between 1975 and 1979, shows a slight regaining of popularity. Finally, use of sedatives and tranquilizers is generally declining.

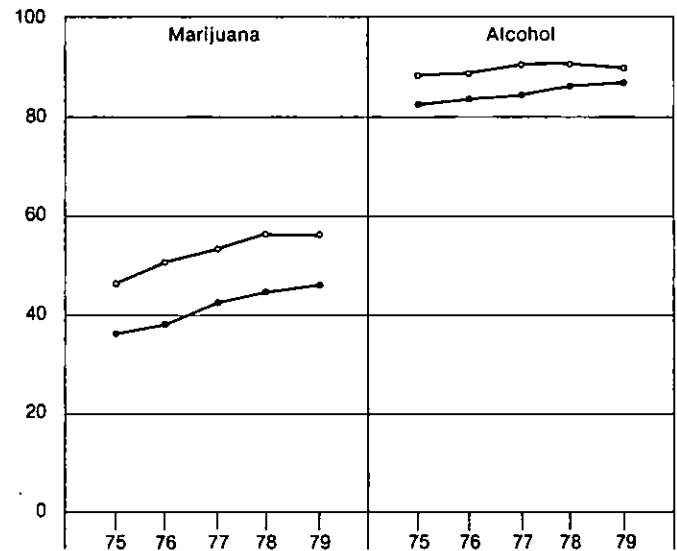
Most of these trends have been occurring about equally among males and females. A major exception is in the use of tranquilizers. Since 1977, use of tranquilizers by males (who at that time were less likely than females to have used them) has remained essentially constant; but use by females has been declining and reached a level lower than that for males in 1979.

In Chart 3 the trends for annual use of marijuana and alcohol are presented. Note that Chart 3 uses a different scale than Chart 2. Annual prevalence of marijuana increased steadily and substantially between 1975 and 1978 for both males and females; from 1978 to 1979, however, there has been a distinct slowing of this increase, with use by males actually having remained steady. Alcohol use by females shows a very slight upward shift.

While these annual rates are certainly important indicators, frequency of drug use may be even more important. We have found a particularly useful indicator of frequent use to be the use of a drug class on 20 or more occasions during the past 30 days, which we refer to as "daily or near-daily" use. Most illicit drugs show extremely low percentages of seniors reporting use at this frequency; less than one percent report daily use of any of the illicit drugs except marijuana.

Chart 3. TRENDS IN ANNUAL PREVALENCE OF MARIJUANA AND ALCOHOL, 1975-79, BY SEX

Percent Who Used in Past Year

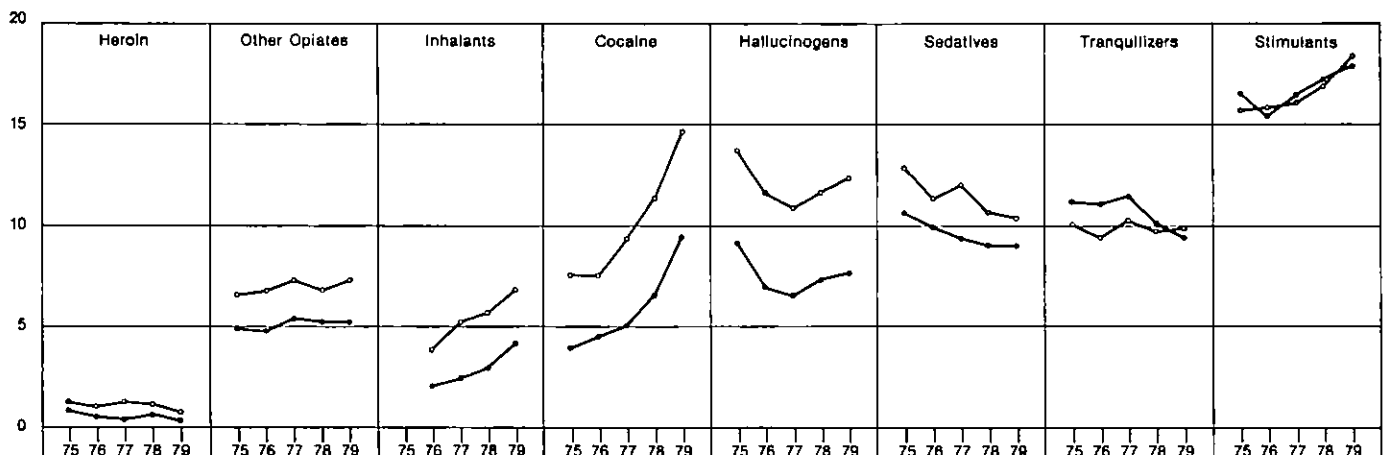


Key: —○— Males; —●— Females.

A particularly important finding, shown in Chart 4, is that the alarming increase seen between 1975 and 1978 in rate of daily or near-daily use of marijuana seems to have halted between 1978 and 1979. The percentage of males who reported daily use had gone up from 8.1 percent in 1975 to 14.2 percent in 1978, but the figure dropped to 12.7 percent in 1979. Females' use at this high frequency had also increased though not so sharply (4.0 percent in 1975 to 7.1 percent in 1978); they show only a slight increase to 7.3 percent in 1979.

Chart 2. TRENDS IN ANNUAL PREVALENCE OF EIGHT ILLICIT DRUGS, 1975-79, BY SEX

Percent Who Used Drug In Past Year



Key: —○— Males; —●— Females.

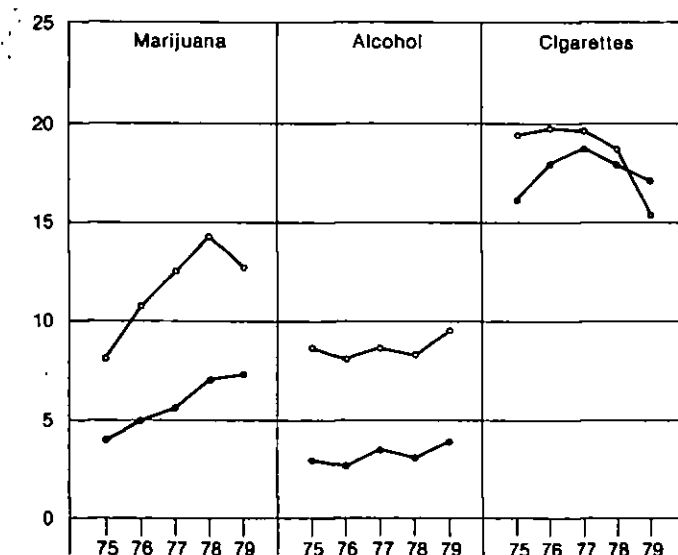
Regular cigarette smoking (one-half pack or more per day) is distinctly higher than daily use of either marijuana or alcohol, and some very interesting trends have been developing. From 1975 to 1977, females' smoking had increased, virtually equalling males' smoking rates, which traditionally had been higher. Since 1977, both sexes have shown a decline in prevalence, but use among males appears to be declining faster. Thus, for the first time, more females than males are regular cigarette smokers (17.1 percent vs. 15.4 percent).

Daily use of alcohol had been essentially constant between 1975 and 1978 for both sexes, but both showed some increase in 1979. It remains the case that daily use of marijuana is more common in this age group than daily use of alcohol.

It would be misleading to leave the impression that, because daily use of alcohol is relatively low, there is little cause for concern about alcohol use by seniors. On the contrary, we find that "binge" drinking is quite common, and increasingly so. We asked respondents to think back over the previous two weeks, and tell us how many times that had had five or more drinks in a row. More than half of the males (52 percent) and nearly one-third of the females (31 percent) reported such heavy drinking on at least one occasion. These figures are up slightly from 1975, when 49 percent of the males and 26 percent of the females reported such use. Furthermore, the percentage of seniors who say that most or all of their friends get drunk at least once a week has increased from 27 percent in 1976 to 35 percent in 1979. Thus, about one-third of seniors now report that most or all of their friends get drunk at least once a week. (In 1979, the figure for males was 37 percent; for females, 28 percent.)

Chart 4. TRENDS IN 30-DAY PREVALENCE OF DAILY USE OF MARIJUANA, ALCOHOL, AND CIGARETTES, 1975-79, BY SEX

Percent Using Daily



Key: —○— Males; —●— Females.

Note: Daily use for alcohol and marijuana is defined as use on 20 or more occasions in the past thirty days. Daily use of cigarettes is defined as smoking a half-pack or more per day in the past thirty days.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Along with actual behaviors, Monitoring the Future has been surveying attitudes and beliefs about drug use. First, it should be made clear that the great majority of seniors have been and continue to be generally quite conservative in their attitudes and beliefs about the use of illicit drugs. Except for marijuana, regular use of any of the illicit drugs is seen as entailing "great risk" of harm for the user. The percentages perceiving great risk in regular use range between 70 and 90 percent for all drugs other than marijuana. Regular use of marijuana is judged to involve great risk by considerably fewer — 42 percent. This latter figure increased from 35 percent in 1978, a shift which coincides with the halt in the rise in daily use. This coincidence suggests a possible reason for the halt: seniors are beginning to perceive greater risk associated with regular use, perhaps because of the increased attention given by the media and government officials to the potential hazards.

In addition to perceiving considerable risk of harm, seniors are generally very disapproving of drug use. Regular use of any illicit drug except marijuana is disapproved by the overwhelming majority (at least 90 percent); even for marijuana, regular use is disapproved by about two-thirds (69 percent). Just about the same proportion — two-thirds — disapprove of smoking a pack or more of cigarettes per day, or drinking alcohol at the rate of one or two drinks per day.

As would be expected, disapproval rates are lower for experimental or occasional use. Of all the illicit drugs, experimenting with marijuana is by far the least disapproved; still, one in three seniors (34 percent) disapproves of even trying it. Thus, while marijuana is sometimes thought to be universally accepted among high school seniors, there is in fact a very significant minority who remain opposed to any marijuana use at all.

There has been rather little in the way of major changes in the last several years in attitudes and beliefs. There are two exceptions: cocaine disapproval is down somewhat, and disapproval of regular cigarette smoking has been steadily increasing.

Outlook for the Future

Based on the annual surveys conducted since 1975, there appear to be both bad news and good news in the outlook for drug use in the 1980s. Perhaps the best news is that regular cigarette smoking seems to have peaked around 1977 and may be on a downturn. Female teenagers have indeed "come a long way," so that now more of them are regular smokers than males; but even their use rates seem to have peaked. Also in the category of good news is the fact that there continues to be a great deal of conservatism about the use of illicit drugs, especially drugs other than marijuana. With respect to marijuana use, the leveling off of what had been sharply rising trend lines, particularly for use at the near-daily level, will come as good news to most.

On the negative side, cocaine use has increased sharply and shows no signs yet of a downturn. Also distressing is the high level of "binge" drinking. And, in fact, all illicit drugs show levels of use which, while not nearly as high as marijuana and not showing any major increases, are nevertheless considerably higher than most adults would prefer to see.

One very interesting thing to be watching in the 1980s and beyond is what happens to behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about illicit drugs on the part of those who have recently entered adulthood. As the children of the 1960s and 1970s become adults — and parents — in the 1980s, will they adopt the even more conservative views of the older generations, or will they retain their own less conservative views, especially with respect to marijuana? One factor which is sure to have a major impact will be the results of new research on the consequences of marijuana use. Extrapolating from recent trends in cigarette use and related attitudes, it seems likely that firm data on hazards associated with marijuana will result in more conservative views — on the part of new senior classes as well as those who graduated in the 1960s and 1970s.

MQEM Forecast — April 1980 Revision

The latest revision of the Michigan Quarterly Econometric Model (MQEM) forecast was released in early April by University of Michigan economists Saul Hymans, Harold Shapiro, and Joan Cray. The April forecast—undertaken to incorporate President Carter's new anti-inflation program—was in fact a modification of one released in early March, which foresaw a protracted period of slow but positive real economic growth through mid-1981. This contrasted with the November 1979 forecast—reported in the previous issue of this journal—of a mild recession in 1980, with 3 of 4 quarters having GNP declines.

Highlights of the April 1980 forecast follow, in the economists' words.

The Administration's program of credit controls and tighter fiscal policy turns our March forecast of a near-recession economy into a true recession of about a year in length. We are projecting four quarters of declining output from 1980:2 through 1981:1, with the sharpest rate of decline of real GNP in 1980:2 (3¼ percent at annual rate) followed by more modest rates of decline during the next three quarters (all slightly less than one percent at annual rate). As a result the unemployment rate is projected to be about 7½ percent by the end of 1980 and close to 8½ percent by the fall of 1981.

Sectors of the economy exhibiting weakness include those areas which appeared weak in our March forecast—homebuilding activity, business fixed investment, and consumer purchases of durable goods. Consumer purchases of durable goods appear even weaker than in March, in part as a result of the imposition of credit controls. In addition, however, car sales weaken in response to the recession and higher gas prices. Car sales dip below a 9 million unit rate by mid-1980 and stay below that rate until spring of 1981. Other areas of consumer spending also exhibit weakness as a result of the credit controls and the feedback effects of the recession.

Our assumptions regarding federal expenditures in conjunction with the federal revenue projections contained in the forecast do not yield anything like a balanced budget for fiscal '81, although some progress is made toward that goal. In the absence of any budget cuts and the fee on imported oil we would project a deficit of \$50 billion for FY '81. With the budget cuts and increased revenues from the oil import fee, we project a deficit of \$35 billion. If we had not assumed a rollback of the scheduled increase in social security taxes in 1981, our projected budget deficit would have been closer to \$22 billion.

Prices, as measured by the nonfarm business deflator, are forecast to rise 9.1 percent from 1979:4 to 1980:4 and at a 7.9 percent annual rate during the three quarters from 1980:4 to 1981:3. These projections are in fact somewhat higher than would have been the case in the absence of the Administration's program. The combination of credit controls and budget cuts, by slowing the economy down, causes declines in productivity which initially offset the deflationary pressures of lower aggregate demand by raising unit labor costs. Only in the final quarter of the forecast does the slowdown in the demand for goods and services begin to dominate price determination in the model.

While the Administration's program does not succeed in reducing the rate of inflation over the range of our forecast, the behavior of prices in the latter quarters of the forecast clearly indicates that, over a longer horizon beginning after mid-1981, the program would indeed produce some decline in inflation.

1980:1 GNP Statistics

As OUTLOOK went to press, preliminary first quarter 1980 GNP statistics were released by the Commerce Department. New values for the series displayed in the GNP accounts section of our Data Appendix table (p. 44) follow:

Gross National Product	2520
Personal Consumption Expenditures	1634
Durable Goods	221.8
Nondurable Goods	653.0
Services	759.4
Gross Private Domestic Investment	388.8
Nonresidential	271.6
Residential Structures	112.7
Change in Bus. Inventories	4.5
Net Exports	-21.0
Government Purchases	518.3
Disposable Personal Income	1737
Personal Saving Rate	3.4