

# Illicit Drug Use



## Information Brief

Special Edition | September, 2004

### What the National Survey on Drug Use and Health Tells Us

#### Overview

This year's National Survey on Drug Use and Health released in September 2004 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration shows no change in the overall rate of drug use over the 2002 to 2003 period. Additionally, there were no significant changes in current or past month drug use for any illicit drug monitored by the survey. The percentage of youth perceiving great risk from smoking marijuana increased, which suggests that prevention efforts are having a positive effect. In terms of new users, the survey indicates that the nation faces major challenges—perhaps epidemics—from prescription drugs, ecstasy, marijuana, and cocaine.

#### Overall Drug Use

Over 19.5 million Americans, representing 8.2 percent of the population aged 12 and older, used illicit drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and heroin on a regular basis. Almost half of all Americans have used an illicit substance—most likely marijuana—at least once in their lifetime.

It is clear that the most popular illicit drug of abuse is marijuana. Approximately 14.6 million Americans—or 6.2 percent of the population—used marijuana on a regular basis in 2003.

Most drug users are employed, but those who are unemployed use illicit drugs at substantially higher rates. An estimated 18.2 percent of unemployed adults aged 18 and older used illicit drugs on a current basis compared with 7.9 percent for those employed full time and 10.7 percent for those employed part time.

A total of 6.3 million Americans used prescription drugs nonmedically in 2003. This represents 2.7 percent of the population aged 12 or older. Of

those who reported nonmedical use of a prescription drug, 4.7 million used pain relievers, 1.8 million used tranquilizers, 1.2 million used stimulants, and 0.3 million used sedatives. There was a significant increase from 2002 to 2003 in the number of persons aged 12 or older reporting lifetime nonmedical use of pain relievers, from 29.6 million to 31.2 million.

Rural areas experienced a significant decline in the rate of illicit drug use. The rate of current illicit drug use fell by over 50 percent, from 6.7 percent to 3.1 percent. Drug use in urbanized areas, including large metropolitan areas, remained unchanged.

#### Youth Illicit Drug Use

The survey reports no change in the overall rate of current illicit drug use among those aged 12 to 17 between 2002 and 2003. The 2003 rate of 11.2 percent was not significantly different from the 2002 rate of 11.6 percent. The rate of current marijuana use was also unchanged—8.2 percent used in 2002 compared with 7.9 percent in 2003. Again, the difference is not statistically significant.

Heavy marijuana use declined in 2003: The number of young people using marijuana daily or almost daily declined from 358,000 in 2002 to 282,000 in 2003. The number using marijuana 20 or more days on a per-month basis declined from 603,000 in 2002 to 482,000 in 2003.

Youth attitudes about the perceived risk associated with marijuana use are improving. The survey reports that 34.9 percent of young people perceive great risk from smoking marijuana once a month, up from 32.4 percent in 2002. One explanation for the decline in heavy marijuana use is that perceptions of great risk from smoking once or twice a week rose significantly in 2003 to 54.4 percent.

#### Quick Facts

- An estimated **19.5 million** Americans aged 12 and older **used illicit drugs** in 2003.
- Almost **half of all Americans** have **tried an illicit drug** at least once in their lifetime.
- The rate of **illicit drug use** among **youth was 11.2 percent**.
- The **number people treated in specialty facilities declined** from 2.3 million in 2002 to 1.9 million in 2003.
- An average of **7000** Americans **tries marijuana** for the first time **each day**.
- Approximately **one in six youths is approached** by someone selling drugs.
- **83.6 percent** of young people received prevention messages outside of school in the past year; **78.1 percent** received prevention messages in school.
- The top reason why **adults don't seek treatment** is **cost and insurance barriers**.

# National Survey on Drug Use and Health

## Dependence and Treatment

Some 21.6 million Americans were dependent on or abused any illicit drugs or alcohol in 2003—no change between 2002 and 2003. In 2003, 6.8 million people were dependent on illicit drugs and 3.1 million were dependent on both an illicit drug and alcohol.

An estimated 3.3 million people received some kind of substance abuse treatment in 2003, representing 15 percent of the 21.6 million Americans dependent on any illicit drug or alcohol. Approximately 1.8 million—or 27 percent—of the 6.8 million people dependent on an illicit drug received some type of treatment in the past year. An estimated 1.2 million of the 3.1 million people dependant on both an illicit drug and alcohol received some type of treatment.

While the number of people dependent on illicit drugs or alcohol did not change in 2003, the number receiving treatment declined. Treatment in “specialty” facilities—received at drug or alcohol rehabilitation facilities (inpatient or outpatient), hospitals (inpatient only), or mental health centers—fell by 400,000 from 2.3 million to 1.9 million. This decrease is statistically significant and is driven by a decrease in treatment among adults aged 26 or older.

Among young people between 12 and 17 years of age, the rate of dependence or abuse of illicit drugs or alcohol was 8.9 percent. The rate of dependence on or abuse of marijuana declined from 4.3 percent to 3.8 percent between 2002 and 2003.

## Drug Epidemics

The drug problem reflects use of multiple drugs each in various stages of an epidemic. Epidemiologists who study drug use trends define epidemics as sustained periods of increased numbers of first-time users.

Information on first-time use is especially useful for identifying emerging trends. This year’s survey suggests that the nation is experiencing epidemics in a number of areas.

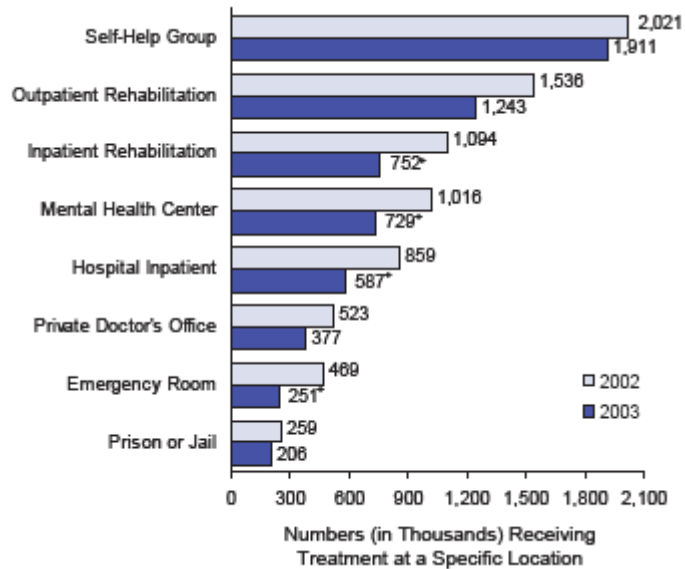
- **Prescription Drugs.** The survey reports the largest increase in new or first-time users occurred among people using pain relievers. The number of first-time users of pain relievers increased over the last decade to about 2 million by 1999. There were 2.5 million from 2000 to 2002. More than half (55 percent) of the new users in 2002 were females, and more than half (56 percent) were 18 years of age or older.
- **Marijuana.** New users of marijuana reached a low point in 1990, but rose each subsequent year until 1995, and thereafter with no consistent trend, with estimates varying between 2.4 million and 2.9 million per year. The number of new users was

2.6 million in 2003, down from the estimates for the previous three years.

- **Cocaine.** Could cocaine be making a comeback? The number of first-time drug users is increasing. In fact, the number of new users each year since 2000 exceeds any annual estimate for the previous decade. While the number of new users is not large—over 1 million each year—it compares with estimates for the late 1970s when our last cocaine epidemic began. Given the human toll caused by this drug, this trend bears close scrutiny.
- **Ecstasy.** New users of ecstasy declined in 2003. The number of new users exploded starting in 1999. The current rate remains the 4th highest in the past 22 years.

For more information about the Survey, see [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

## Treatment Locations for Persons Aged 12 or Older



Note: Statistically significant differences (at 0.05 level) between 2002 and 2003 are denoted by "\*".

Source: NSDUH, 2003



14501 Cervantes Ave., Darnestown, MD 20874

(301) 977-3600

The **Information Brief** is a publication of the Research and Data Analysis Group of Carnevale Associates, LLC. Carnevale Associates provides strategic leadership to public and private organizations through its three practice groups: Strategic Planning, Research and Data Analysis, and Integrated Communications.

[www.carnevaleassociates.com](http://www.carnevaleassociates.com)

© 2004 Carnevale Associates LLC