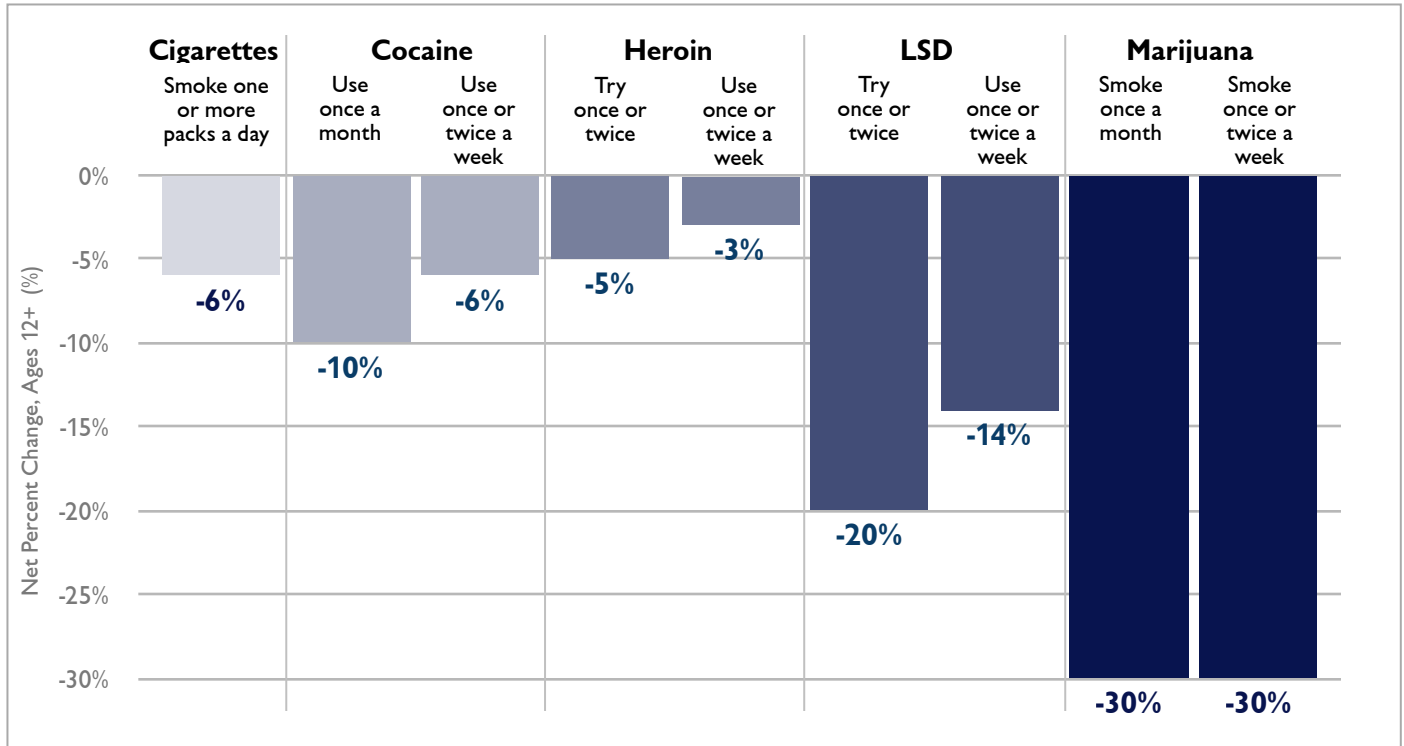


Declining Perceptions of Harm from Substance Use

The perceptions of harm associated with substance use have been steadily declining for most substances since 2015. Across several measures, the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) shows consistent declines in perceived harm associated with using cigarettes, heroin, LSD, and cocaine from 2015 to 2023. Perceptions of harm related to marijuana are also down considerably since 2015, but with slightly more variability from year to year.

FIGURE 1. NET CHANGE IN PERCEPTIONS OF HARM FROM SUBSTANCE USE, 2015-2023¹



HOW NSDUH MEASURES PERCEPTIONS OF HARM

For most substances, the NSDUH collects perceptions of harm data for two measures: (1) a form of “frequent use”, and (2) a form of “less frequent use” – but those measures are variable across substances. For example, for LSD and heroin, NSDUH collects data on the perceived harm associated with “trying once or twice” in a lifetime as a measure of “infrequent use” and “using once or twice per week” as a measure of “frequent use”. Whereas for cocaine, the survey examines the perceptions of harm associated with “use once a month” and “use once or twice per

week”. Across both measures, NSDUH asks respondents to assess the risk of harm associated with that level of use. Response options are no risk, slight risk, moderate risk, and great risk. Data reported here show the net change in the percentage of respondents who select “great risk” for each substance.

STEADY DECLINES ACROSS BOTH FORMS OF USE

From 2015 to 2023, the NSDUH shows steady (i.e., regular, yearly) declines in perceptions of harm across “frequent” and “less frequent” use for cigarettes, heroin, LSD, and cocaine (Figure 1). Marijuana’s decline was the largest

of any substance over the period (-30% for both types of use), though it showed very slight variability by year.

Excluding marijuana, LSD experienced the largest decline over the period for more frequent use (-14%) and less frequent use (-20%). Perceptions of harm associated with more frequent use also declined by 6% for cigarettes (1+ packs per day), 6% for cocaine (once or twice per week), and 3% for heroin (once or twice per week). Meanwhile, perceptions of harm for less frequent use decreased by 10% for cocaine (use once a month) and 5% for heroin (trying once or twice).

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF HARM BY AGE GROUP

For cigarettes, heroin, LSD, and cocaine, diminishing perceptions of harm were slightly more pronounced among youth and young adults. Perceptions of harm also declined among adults aged 26+, but those declines were smaller in every category except “Cocaine – use once or twice a week”. The charts in Figure 2 show the net change in substance risk perception by age group from 2015 to 2023 for the “less frequent use” measure for heroin, LSD, and cocaine, as well as the available measure for cigarettes. The changing perceptions of harm associated with LSD illustrate the pattern. For trying LSD once or twice, overall perception of harm decreased -20%. By age group, perception of harm declined by 19% among adults aged 26+, 23% among youth aged 12-17, and by 31% among young adults aged 18-25.

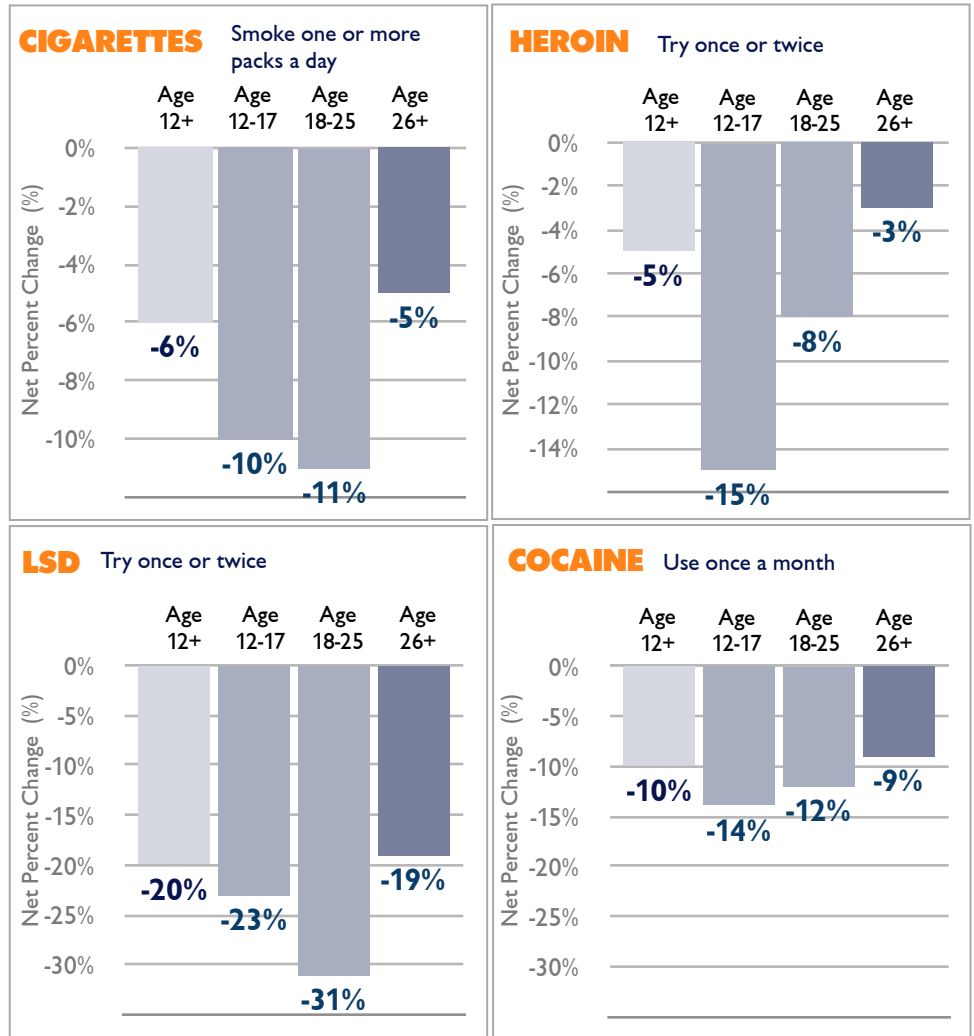
CONCLUSION

Perceptions of harm associated with substance use have been steadily softening for many years. This softening is apparent across most substances and age groups. Since perceived risk of harm is often considered a leading indicator of substance use trends, policymakers and practitioners should continue to monitor substance use trends closely.

NOTES:

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2015-2023). Results from the 2015-2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables. Table 3.1b, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
2. IBID

FIGURE 2. NET CHANGE IN PERCEPTIONS FROM HARM BY AGE GROUP, 2015-2023²





This Info Brief is a publication of Carnevale Associates, LLC. Carnevale Associates brings strategic consulting solutions to governments, organizations, and communities as they confront the policy and program challenges of substance use, behavioral health, and criminal justice.

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