

College Students and Other Drugs

Going to college full time in a two- or four-year college is a risk factor when it comes to drinking alcoholic beverages. Surveys routinely find that full-time undergraduate college students use alcohol, engage in high-risk drinking, and drink heavily at higher rates than peers who are not enrolled full time, including part-time college students and persons not enrolled in college. But when it comes to other drug use, students more closely resemble their noncollege peers.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, for persons aged 18 to 22 years, the rate of current illicit drug use, defined as use within the past 30 days, was nearly the same among full-time undergraduate college students (21.4 percent) as for other persons aged 18 to 22 (22.5 percent).

It's a different story for tobacco. In 2003, college students were less likely to report current cigarette use than were their peers. Students reported using cigarettes in the past month at a rate of 31.4 percent, compared with 45.3 percent of their peers who were not enrolled full time.

Marijuana is by far the most common of the illicit drugs used by college students, with 20.3 percent reporting use within the past 30 days, according to the [Core Institute's](#) 2003 Alcohol and Drug Survey of 38,857 undergraduate students from 89 two- and four-year colleges around the nation. At 4.6 percent, amphetamines are a distant second when it comes to illicit drug use by college students.

Ecstasy, or MDMA, a so-called club drug, raised concerns when there was a sharp increase in its use by college students after 1997. Annual use rates rose fourfold in just three years, from 2.4 percent in 1997 to 9.2 percent in 2001, before it began to decrease, reaching 4.4 percent in 2003. The trends among college students have run fairly parallel to those for the noncollege segment of these young adults and high school seniors through 2003. Since 2000, the noncollege segment has exhibited the highest rate of ecstasy use—reaching 14 percent in 2001, when use among college students and 12th-graders was at 9 percent. But ecstasy use has

sharply declined, with the 2003 annual use rates for college students at 4.4 percent and their noncollege peers at 6.7 percent.

Recently, the nonmedical use of prescription drugs has increased among students and nonstudents alike (see article on page 6). While such use is increasing, it still lags far behind marijuana use.

Good News Over the Long Haul

Since 1980, [Monitoring the Future \(MTF\)](#), an annual survey of drug use by students that is supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, has asked college students about their alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. Student drug use has dropped considerably over the past 24 years. The proportion of college students using any illicit drug in the 12 months prior to the survey dropped fairly steadily between 1980 and 1991—from 56 percent to 29 percent. In other words, illicit drug use fell by nearly half during this 11-year period. After 1991, annual (and also 30-day) prevalence held fairly steady for a couple of years before beginning to rise, reaching 38 percent in 1998—still well below the peak of 56 percent in 1980. There has been little change since, with the 2003 rate at 36.5 percent.

The noncollege group moved similarly from 1980 to 1998. But in 2000, the noncollege group had a 4 percentage-point increase in its annual use of illicit drugs that was due largely to their increased use of marijuana, amphetamines, and tranquilizers in that year. For example, according to MTF, amphetamine use among college students and their noncollege age peers leveled for a year before beginning to increase in both groups after 1992 and 1993, respectively, through 2001, with a leveling through 2003. The 2004 Core Survey found the annual prevalence of amphetamine use among college students to be 8.3 percent. Nevertheless, over the years, those not in college consistently have reported a higher rate of amphetamine use than college students. The noncollege segment's 2003 level of almost 41 percent remains above that of the college student sector. ■

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