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EDITORS AND NEWS DIRECTORS: Detailed information on the study may be obtained from Dr. Lloyd Johnston, Institute for Social Research, U-M, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109, telephone (313) 763-5043.

ANN ARBOR---Cigarette use among American young people is now declining sharply, members of The University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research have found in a series of national surveys.

In a report about to be published by the sponsoring agency, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, three U-M social scientists state "perhaps the most dramatic change in substance abuse now taking place among American young people is the sharp drop in regular cigarette smoking."

Although they warn that "the problem has not gone away," the U-M researchers suggest that "public health campaigns dealing with smoking may well have had an important impact on the young."

The authors---Drs. Lloyd Johnston, Jerald Bachman, and Patrick O'Malley--- have been conducting nationwide surveys of about 17,000 high school seniors every year since 1975. In the study, titled "Monitoring the Future," participating students are asked about a wide range of issues including their own smoking practices.

"Earlier reports from the study showed regular smoking to have risen sharply among female seniors until 1977---by which time the long-standing difference between the sexes in rates of smoking had been eliminated, the U-M researchers say. "Since 1977, however, smoking among high school seniors of both sexes has been dropping. For example, the number of seniors smoking daily has decreased by more than one-fourth in just three years. In 1977, 29 per cent said they smoked daily, but by 1980 only 21 per cent said the same, with about half of that decrease occurring between 1979 and 1980."

As to the reason for these dramatic changes, the authors state "we are inclined to attribute this change to a long-term increase in young people's
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health concerns about smoking, as well as to a sharp decrease in the perceived peer acceptance of smoking.

"The amount of risk perceived to be associated with regular cigarette smoking has been rising steadily since 1975, so that now nearly two-thirds of all seniors say they think there is 'great risk' in smoking a pack or more of cigarettes per day. Over the same period there also has been a substantial increase in the proportion of seniors who think their friends would disapprove of their smoking at that rate. Three-quarters (74 per cent) now think their friends would disapprove, up from little more than half of the 1975 seniors (55 per cent).

"Since seniors' own disapproval of cigarette smoking has changed rather little over the same interval---it has always been rather high (at about 70 per cent)---it appears that young people have simply been sharing their individual opinions on the subject more with their peers. (Nearly all seniors (91 per cent) feel that their parents would disapprove of their smoking regularly---a fact which also has not changed much since 1975.)"

Commenting on the results, Johnston says "the declining smoking rates suggest that the public health campaigns dealing with smoking may well have had an important impact on the young." As for students becoming more aware of the extent to which their peers disapprove of smoking, he adds: "Clearly the norms have changed regarding the legitimacy of expressing one's disapproval of other people's smoking. Early on, the adverse health evidence gave legitimacy to communicating such disapproval because it expressed caring or concern for the well-being of the smoker.

"More recently, non-smokers have mustered the courage to speak out on behalf of their own comfort and well-being as well. Further, a number of school systems have intentionally encouraged the sharing of personal attitudes about smoking as part of their newly-instituted smoking-prevention programs. The net effect of all of this seems to be that young people are becoming increasingly aware of how many of their peers look unfavorably on their smoking.

"While we think this drop-off in smoking among our newest young adults is likely to have very favorable health consequences for the nation 30 or 40 years hence," Johnston adds, "clearly the problem has not gone away. Particularly among those young people not bound for college, cigarette smoking remains disturbingly widespread. Some 36 per cent of them reported daily smoking compared with 19 per cent of the college-bound."

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