

February 1, 1983 (1)
Contact: Gil Goodwin
Phone: (313) 764-7260

The University of Michigan

news

Information Services
6008 Fleming Administration Bldg.
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

FOR RELEASE 12:00 NOON, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1983

EDITORS AND NEWS DIRECTORS: A separate, coordinated release is being issued simultaneously by Dr. Edward Brandt, Assistant Secretary for Health, Department of Health and Human Services, Humphrey Building, Washington, D.C. To obtain further information on that release, contact Carol Sussman, Office of Communications and Public Affairs, National Institute on Drug Abuse (301) 443-6245. Detailed information on this drug abuse study may be obtained from Dr. Lloyd Johnston, U-M Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109 (telephone (313) 763-5043).

ANN ARBOR---American young people are continuing to moderate their use of illicit drugs, according to the most recent in a University of Michigan series of eight national surveys of the nation's high school seniors.

Between 1981 and 1982 nearly all classes of illicit drugs showed declines in current use (that is, use during the month preceding the survey), with the largest drops occurring this year for marijuana, cocaine, stimulants, and sedatives. Tranquilizer use and hallucinogen use also showed declines, though more modest ones. The exceptions to this overall picture of declining use occurred for three of the less frequently used classes of drugs--heroin, opiates other than heroin, and inhalants--none of which showed any appreciable change in 1982.

These student surveys have been conducted annually since 1975 by the U-M's Institute for Social Research, under research grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). A nationally representative sample of some 17,000 seniors, located in about 130 public and private high schools nationwide, participates each year.

The 1982 results are contained in a forthcoming report, titled "Seven Year National Trends in Student Drug Use, Attitudes, and Beliefs," to be released by NIDA in March. Its authors, and the directors of the study, are U-M social psychologists Lloyd Johnston, Jerald Bachman, and Patrick O'Malley.

The report states that marijuana, by far the most widely used of the illicit drugs, has shown a pattern of consistent decline since 1979. While the proportion of seniors having ever tried the drug has not changed much (60 percent in 1979 vs. 59 percent in 1982), current use has dropped considerably--from 37 percent in 1979 to 29 percent in 1982.

Of most importance, however, is the decrease in daily or near daily use (defined as use of 20 or more occasions in the past 30 days, according to the U-M study. Between 1975 (when this study began) and 1978, daily marijuana use climbed rapidly and steadily from 6 percent to 11 percent of all seniors. Since 1978, however, there has been just about as rapid a fall in daily use, as young people's concerns about the consequences of regular use have grown and peer acceptance has fallen. (Some 60 percent now attribute great risk to regular marijuana use, up from 35 percent in 1978; and three-quarters now think their friends would disapprove of such behavior.) In 1982, active daily use was back down to where it was in 1975, at 6 percent, or about one in every sixteen seniors.

In addition to marijuana, the use of several other classes of drugs continued to decline in 1982, the U-M study says. The powerful hallucinogen PCP showed a drop in annual prevalence (that is, in the proportion of seniors using in the prior year) from 7 percent in 1979 to 2.2 percent in 1982. The non-medical use of barbiturates (a major class of sedatives) has fallen steadily from 10.7 percent in 1975 to 5.5 percent in 1982; and the non-medical use of tranquilizers has been steadily declining from 10.8 percent in 1977 to 7 percent in 1982.

Two classes of drugs which had declined substantially in earlier years showed no further decline this year. Heroin, for which the annual prevalence had dropped from 1 percent to 0.5 percent between 1975 and 1979, has shown no further decline since 1979. And the amyl and butyl nitrites (inhalants, known on the streets by such names as "snappers," "poppers," Locker Room, and Rush), for which annual prevalence had dropped from 6.5 percent in 1979 to 3.7 percent in 1981, showed no significant change in 1982.

Three other important classes of drugs--cocaine, amphetamines, and methaqualone--began to decline for the first time in 1982, the U-M study notes. The use of cocaine by this age group had shown a dramatic increase in the late 1970s, then a leveling between 1979 and 1981, and finally in 1982 a modest decline was observed--with annual prevalence falling from 12.4 percent to 11.5 percent.

(more)

Reported non-medical use of amphetamines (prescription-controlled stimulants) rose sharply between 1979 and 1981, although the investigators attributed part of this rise to the inappropriate inclusion by some respondents of over-the-counter stimulants and "look-alike" pseudo-amphetamines (sold mostly by mail orders).

In 1982, the monthly prevalence of reported amphetamine use went down for the first time. "We think this is a real, but very recent decline," states Johnston, "and again due in part to a change in the use of some of the non-prescription stimulants--particularly the 'look-alikes,' the distribution of which has recently been outlawed in many states." The annual prevalence for amphetamines now stands at 20 percent, ranking them second to marijuana among the illicitly used drugs.

The use of methaqualone (known as "ludes" or Quaaludes) also dropped for the first time in 1982, following a rise up to 1981. Prevalence fell slightly, from 7.6 percent in 1981 to 6.8 percent in 1982.

Asked why he thinks these generally downward trends have been occurring, Johnston commented: "I think there are a number of contributing factors. For one thing, we are past certain historical crises, like Vietnam and Watergate, which so alienated our younger generations, at least some of whom chose drug use as a symbol of rebellion. And the fact that the children of the baby boom were in their adolescence during that period may well have had a catalytic effect on that alienation and rebellion. Now, a serious recession has had its own sobering influence on youth.

"For another thing, parents, schools, and other institutions in the society have become more active and sophisticated in their drug prevention efforts. And the medical profession has become considerably more cautious about prescribing psychotherapeutic drugs like amphetamines, barbiturates, and tranquilizers.

"We are also finding that young people are increasingly avoiding certain drug-using behaviors because of their concerns about health consequences. I think this has been in large part due to the accumulation and dissemination of more credible research evidence on the possible consequences of using many of these substances. In addition, there is less peer acceptance for certain behaviors--particularly heavy marijuana use. I believe all of these factors have contributed to the declines we have observed."

Turning to the two major licit drugs, the U-M study notes that alcohol use has remained relatively stable in this population since 1975,

(more)

though at high levels. Nearly all young people have tried alcohol by the end of their senior year (93 percent) and the great majority (70 percent) have used in the prior month. Daily drinking is at exactly the same level in 1982 as it was in 1975 (5.7 percent). There is some evidence over the last year or two that there actually may be some very gradual diminution in alcohol use, though it is still too early to say for certain.

Cigarette smoking exhibited a dramatic decline between 1977 and 1981, during which time daily smoking fell from 29 percent to 20 percent. In 1982, however, that decline halted and perhaps even began to reverse.

Commenting on the preponderance of "good news" in the 1982 results, Johnston added: "It is important that we put the good news in perspective. While it is true that there has been a decline or leveling for virtually all types of illicitly used drugs, it is still the case that an exceptional number of American young people are involved to some degree in illicit drug use. By the time they finish high school, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of our young people have tried an illicit drug and over one-third have tried an illicit drug other than marijuana.

"Of even greater importance, one in sixteen is a daily marijuana user, nearly that many are daily drinkers, one in five has at some time been a daily marijuana user for at least a month, and 41 percent state that they drank five or more drinks in a row at least once in the past two weeks. In addition, 30 percent smoked cigarettes in the past month, a substantial proportion of whom are, or soon will be, daily smokers.

"These are truly staggering levels of substance use and abuse, whether by historical standards in our own country, or by comparison to nearly all other countries in the world. We still have a long, long way to go," concluded Johnston.

On a new topic for the survey, Johnston commented, "we added questions on the use of over-the-counter diet pills for the first time in the 1982 survey." (The active ingredient in nearly all brands of such pills is phenylpropanolamine.) "Frankly, we were a little shocked by what we found: among senior girls, over 40 percent had tried these pills and 14 percent, or one in every seven, fit our definition of 'current users'-- that is, they had used diet pills in the month prior to the survey. I certainly hope these drugs are as safe as their manufacturers and the FDA purport them to be, because a substantial proportion of America's young women are using them in their formative years."

#