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EDITORS AND NEWS DIRECTORS: Further information on the study of drug usage may be obtained from Lloyd Johnston at the U-M Institute for Social Research, telephone (313) 763-5043.

ANN ARBOR---University of Michigan researchers report that the use of marijuana and other illicit drugs by American high school seniors continued to decline in 1983.

In a report to be released by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the federal agency sponsoring the research, social psychologists Lloyd Johnston, Patrick O'Malley and Jerald Bachman of the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR) state that the overall decline is "an encouraging sign that the downturn, which began in the past couple of years, is real and continuing."

The investigators caution that while use of certain drugs has shown a rather dramatic decline, the proportion of high school seniors who have had some illicit drug experience has not yet dropped a great deal.

The findings are drawn from the most recent national survey of high school seniors conducted by the U-M Institute.

Among the more important findings in the study:

The proportion of high school seniors who used marijuana during the year prior to the survey dropped from a high of 51 percent in 1979 to 42 percent in 1983.

More importantly, daily use of marijuana (20 or more occasions in the month preceding the survey) has fallen by one-half--from 10.7 percent in 1978 to 5.5 percent in 1983, the lowest level since the study began in 1975.

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"Clearly American young people have become more cautious about the regular use of marijuana," the U-M investigators say. "Much of this is attributable to their increased concern about the psychological and physical health effects of the drug."

The report reveals that last year 63 percent of seniors believed that regular marijuana smokers run a great risk of harming themselves physically or otherwise. In 1978 only 35 percent expressed that view.

Peer pressure appears to influence marijuana use as well.

In 1983 fully 83 percent of all seniors said they personally disapproved of regular marijuana use, up from 68 percent in 1978. A majority (61 percent) now disapprove of even occasional use.

Decreased availability does not explain the changes in marijuana use, the researchers emphasize, since 86 percent of the seniors said they could get the drug if they wanted to.

Other categories of drugs which showed declining use from 1982 to 1983 include amphetamines (prescription-controlled stimulants), barbiturates (sedatives), methaqualone (Quaaludes), and LSD. The decrease in barbiturate usage continues a long-term decline which began in 1975, when the annual usage rate was twice as high as in 1983, the report notes.

Not all drugs showed a decline in the latest survey. Although use of PCP fell by nearly two-thirds in the previous three-year period, there was a small, though not statistically significant, increase in active use in 1983.

Use of heroin and other opiates has remained virtually unchanged since 1979, as has the use of cocaine. The researchers note that prior to 1979 heroin use had fallen by one-half in four years, but the use of other opiates had remained constant, and the use of cocaine had doubled.

Among 1983 seniors, one in six (16 percent) reported some experience with cocaine; 9 percent some experience with opiates other than heroin; and 1.2 percent some experience with heroin.

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National Institute on Drug Abuse reports actually show a significant increase in emergency room admissions across the country for overdoses related to these classes of drugs, the U-M researchers say.

Overall, 63 percent of the 1983 seniors in the survey indicated they had tried an illicit drug. Some 40 percent said they had tried an illicit drug other than marijuana. About half had used an illicit drug in the year preceding the survey--a figure only about six percent below the peak level of 1979. The proportion using an illicit drug other than marijuana has remained roughly the same as in 1979.

"We know that our statistics are slight underestimates for all young people that age," Johnston explains, "because we are missing the roughly 20 percent who have left school by their senior year. These drop-outs are known to have higher than average drug use rates. However, a recent scientific review by the National Institute on Drug Abuse concluded that the underestimation is modest and that the trends should be little affected because the trends for drop-outs would very likely parallel the trends for those in school."

Johnston comments on the overall significance of the findings:

"The 1960s and 1970s marked perhaps the most sizeable and widespread epidemic of illicit drug use ever experienced by any country. The use of marijuana, various hallucinogens, cocaine, and other drugs spread at an unprecedented rate, particularly among our youth.

"In the 80s, by way of contrast, we have experienced a leveling and the beginning of a decline in youthful drug involvement, and, in the case of some specific drugs, a quite substantial decline."

Johnston says the survey results are encouraging, but cautions, "we must not lose sight of the extent of the problem which remains. A majority of our young people still have at least experimented with illicit drugs by the time they finish high school. A substantial number become seriously involved. I know of no other developed country in the world where such a large proportion of youth become involved with drugs."

Some authorities have suggested that alcohol consumption may be replacing the use of illicit drugs.

The U-M report states: "There is no evidence that the currently observed drop in marijuana use is leading to a concomitant increase in alcohol use."

Five and one-half percent of the seniors reported they consume alcohol daily, down slightly over the last several years. Unchanged is the
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proportion of seniors who had taken five or more drinks in a row during the two weeks prior to the survey--an "alarming" 41 percent, according to the investigators.

"We think there has been no displacement effect because the underlying motives, attitudes and beliefs of these young people regarding drug use have been changing," Johnston says. "We believe it is necessary for these factors to change if we are ever to be successful at controlling drug abuse, because in a free society we are never going to be able to fully control people's access to drugs, whether licit or illicit."

The rate of cigarette smoking in this age group remained unchanged in 1983. Following a sharp drop in smoking between 1977 and 1980, the daily smoking rate has remained relatively constant at about 21 percent.

Dr. William Pollin, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, commented on the latest survey results: "We find the decline in the daily use of marijuana extremely welcome news. I think that it will have an immediate beneficial effect for many of our young people as they proceed through their formative years. But we are concerned about the degree to which a problem remains, not only in the use of marijuana, but of cocaine, stimulants, heroin, and the various other drugs.

"And the failure of cigarette use to continue its decline in the past several years is disappointing. Measures of problem drug use, and drug use in the work place, are in many instances at surprisingly and dangerously high levels. We simply cannot accept problems of this magnitude remaining among our youth. More simply must, and can, be done."

The ISR survey, which has been conducted annually since 1975, involved 16,000 to 17,000 students a year in approximately 130 high schools. Respondents are selected to be representative of all seniors in public and private schools in the coterminous United States. Self-administered, confidential questionnaires are given in classrooms. The recent survey of the class of 1983 was conducted last spring.

A single copy of the forthcoming report, "Highlights from Drugs and American High School Students, 1975-1983," may be obtained without charge from the National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information, National Institute on Drug Abuse, 5600 Fisher's Lane, Rockville, MD 20857.

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