**TEEN SUBSTANCE ABUSE REMAINS BELOW PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The COVID pandemic was a historic event that produced a dramatic decline in teen substance use from 2020-2021. It appears the one-year decline is holding. The latest data shows teen drug use has not returned to 2020 pre-pandemic levels. During the past year 11% of eighth graders, 20% of 10th graders and 31% of 12th graders reported using illicit drugs. Substances used the most by teens were alcohol, nicotine vaping and cannabis.

**Alcohol**: Use remained stable for 8th and 10th graders, with 15% and 31% reporting use in the past year. It declined for 12th graders to 46% reporting use in the past year (compared to 52% the previous year). Students in 12th grade in 2023 are members of a cohort that were just starting high school and were in 9th grade in 2020, when the majority of school buildings were closed as a result of the pandemic. While in 9th grade these students had the largest decreases among students in all grades for substance use, including alcohol. This year’s decrease in alcohol use in 12th grade may stem from the lowered levels of alcohol initiation three years earlier.

**Beer:** Beer drinking has not returned to the pre-pandemic level in any of the three grades. Drinking declined substantially in 2021 during the pandemic and in 2023 levels declined slightly further or stayed level. In the long term, beer use has declined substantially in all three grades. From 1991 to 2023 lifetime use decreased in 12th grade from 82% to 42%, in 10th grade from 74% to 27% and in 8th grade from 59% to 14%.

**Alcoholic Beverages with Caffeine**: Alcoholic beverages containing caffeine significantly increased from 2022 to 2023 in 8th grade, from 4.7% to 7.5%. In 10th and 12th grades prevalence was little changed but has declined by more than 50% since 2011.

**Flavored Alcoholic Beverages**: In 2023 use of flavored alcoholic beverages (known as alcopops or malternatives) returned to pre-pandemic levels in 12th grade. Prevalence was 38% in 2019, declined to 32% in 2021 and then returned to 38% in 2022 and 36% in 2023. In 8th and 10th grades use declined slightly and did not return to pre-pandemic levels.

**Marijuana:** 2023 levels remain substantial but have not returned to pre-pandemic 2020 levels. During the past year, 8% of eighth graders, 18% of 10th graders and 29% of 12th graders reported using the drug. Daily marijuana use (use on 20 or more occasions in the past 30 days) increased slightly but not significantly in 2023.

**Marijuana Vaping**. In 2023 the percentage of students who vaped marijuana changed very little in all three grades. The annual use rate in 12th grade has hovered at around 20% since 2019.

**Vape Flavoring**: The percentage of students who report they vaped “just flavoring” did not return to 2020 levels. However, vape flavoring remains common with nearly 20% of 12th graders reporting they vaped “just flavor” in their lifetime and more than 10% having done so in the past year. Almost all students who report vape flavoring also reported vaping nicotine. Most teens who vape just flavoring are doing so as a supplement to their nicotine vaping, not as a substitute for it.

**Nicotine Vaping**: Decreased in all three grades. However, the prevalence of nicotine vaping remains one of the highest among all adolescent substances. The 12-month prevalence levels of 11% in 8th grade and 18% in 10th grade are second only to alcohol. Nicotine vaping’s prevalence of 23% in 12th grade ranks third behind alcohol and marijuana.

**Delta-8:**  Delta-8 is derived from hemp. It contains THC-8 which is chemically similar to the active ingredient THC-9 found in cannabis and reportedly produces a high that some have called “marijuana light.” Because it is derived from hemp, its use and sale are not covered by state, local or federal laws that regulate cannabis. 11.4% of 12th graders reported using the drug and is considerable for a substance that has only recently come to market.

**Cigarettes**: The percentage of adolescents who had ever smoked a cigarette did not significantly change from 2022 to 2023, although it trended slightly downward in all three grades. Overall, cigarette smoking in 2023 is at or near the lowest ever recorded since 1975.

**Inhalants:** The use of inhalants changed little in each of the three grades. Inhalant use is consistently higher in lower grades, a pattern not observed for any other drug. In 2022, 3.6% of 8th graders, 2.4% of 10th graders and 1.8% of 12th graders used inhalants. The early use may reflect the fact that many inhalants are cheap, readily available often in the home and legal to buy and possess. The decline in use with age likely reflects their being seen as “kids” drugs.

**Hallucinogens:** The percentage of 12th grade students using hallucinogens has varied little over the past decade, with use around 4-5 percent over the past decade and in 2023 was 4%. In 10th grade a drop in use during the pandemic in 2021 has persisted and use in 2023 was 2%. In 8th grade declines in use have plateaued since around 2014 mostly because prevalence has hovered around 1% since that time.

**Ecstasy (MDMA):**  The percentage of youth who used MDMA (Molly) did not return to 2020 levels in 2023. All levels for all grades were 2% or less.

**Cocaine:** The percentage of youth using cocaine has not returned to 2020 levels. Use remains less than 1% in all grades.

**Crack:**  In 2023, past year use of crack cocaine was at or near historic lows. Annual use levels among 8th, 10th and 12th grade students were all 0.5% or less.

**Heroin:** The 12-month use of heroin has always been relatively low, with annual prevalence never higher than 2% at any time for any grade. In 2023 the level of annual use was 0.4% or less in each grade.

**Vicodin:** The use of Vicodin without a doctor’s order was less than 1% across all three grades in 2023. The low levels are the result of a marked decline from peaks before 2010 when 3% of 8th grade students, 8% of 10th grade students and 11% of 12th grade students reported using the drug.

**Ritalin:** The stimulant Ritalin is used to treat ADHD. Use without a doctor’s order was lower in 2023 for all three grades (less than 1% in each grade). Prevalence has declined substantially since 2001. In 2001 Ritalin was used by 3% of students in 8th grade, 5% of students in 10th grade and 5% of students in 12th grade.

**Adderall:** The nonmedical use of Adderall declined in all three grades and significantly declined in 12th grade. In 12th grade the prevalence of 1.7% is the lowest since 2009. Levels in 2023 were also low in 8th and 10th grades, at 1.7% and 2.1% respectively.

**ADHD Stimulant Prescription use:**  Medical use of stimulant drugs to treat ADHD was one of the few substances with increasing use after the pandemic. Levels of use were 8% of students in 8th grade and 10th grade and 11% of students in 12th grade. It’s possible that there was an increase in the need for treatment during the pandemic due to adolescents being under more stress. Another possibility is that sheltering at home during the pandemic may have made any attention issues of adolescents more salient to their parents.

**OTC Cough/Cold Medicine**: Several OTC drugs contain dextromethorphan (DXM) which when taken in large doses can mimic hallucinogenic drugs. In 8th grade the prevalence rate in 2023 was 4% of students. In 10th grade it was 3% which is half of the 6% high recorded in 2009. In 12th grade the prevalence held steady at 2.4%.

**Energy Drinks**: These non-alcoholic beverages usually contain high amounts of caffeine and include brands such as Red Bull and Monster. In 2023 levels of daily use in 12th and 10th grades were at the highest levels recorded, at 17% and 18% respectively. In 8th grade it was 13% and declined slightly after five years of steady increases. Energy “shots” usually come in small 2- or 3-ounce containers such as 5-Hour Energy and Redline. In all three grades prevalence has hovered at around 3% to 4% of students.

A Note About Fentanyl

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid similar to morphine. It is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. A 2022 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association noted “In 2021, fentanyls were identified in 77% of adolescent overdose deaths, compared to 13% for benzodiazepines, 10% for methamphetamine, 7% for cocaine, 6% for prescription opioids and 2% for heroin.”

“Beginning in 2020, adolescents experienced a greater relative increase in overdose mortality than the overall population. In the context of decreasing adolescent drug use rates nationally, these shifts suggest heightened risk from illicit fentanyl. Since 2015, fentanyl has been increasingly added to counterfeit pills resembling prescription opioids, benzodiazepines, and other drugs which adolescents may not identify as dangerous and which may be playing a key role in these shifts.”

1. Data is from the University of Michigan’s annual Monitoring the Future survey of students in 8th, 10th and 12th grades. Data was collected from 22,318 students enrolled across 235 public and private school in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)