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Rise in ecstasy use among American teens begins to slow.

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EDITORS: Results of this year's Monitoring the Future survey are being released jointly by the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C., which sponsors the study, and by the University of Michigan, which conducts the study. For further information on the study, contact the principal investigator, Lloyd D. Johnston, at (734) 763-5043.

ANN ARBOR---Use of the drug "ecstasy" continued to increase among American teen-agers in 2001, following sharp increases among adolescents and young adults in recent years, but the rate of increase finally is beginning to slow. That result comes from the most recent national survey in the Monitoring the Future series, conducted annually for the past 27 years by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR).

Ecstasy, also known as MDMA (methylenedioxymethamphetamine), is a stimulant drug, often taken for its hallucinogenic effects. It first became popular in the "rave" and all-night party scene, and its use spread and began to rise sharply in 1999. The proportions of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders who reported having ever taken ecstasy in 2001 were 5 percent, 8 percent and 12 percent, respectively.

The 2001 Monitoring the Future survey included some 44,000 students in 424 public and private secondary schools throughout the coterminous United States. Study director Lloyd D. Johnston and his fellow social psychologists, Jerald G. Bachman and Patrick M. O'Malley, have been conducting the surveys since 1975, with support provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, one of the National Institutes of Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The annual surveys have included high

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school seniors (12th-graders) since 1975, and nationally representative samples of 8th- and 10th-graders since 1991. Questionnaires are administered to students in their classrooms by ISR staff members each spring.

According to the investigators, ecstasy use has risen quite dramatically among young people ages 16 to 26 in the past few years, and last year (2000) also began to rise even among 8th-graders. [Tables 1 and 2, Figure 5] "Since 1998, ecstasy use has roughly doubled among American teen-agers," states Johnston. "While we are seeing a continuing increase again this year, we are also seeing evidence of a deceleration of this rise, as growing proportions of students are coming to see this drug as dangerous." (In fact, no one individual grade actually shows a statistically significant increase this year, but all of them show some continuing increase in both lifetime and annual prevalence; and taken across all three grades combined, this one-year increase is statistically significant.)

"In the past we have seen a turn-around in use occur for other drugs as a result of more young people seeing them as dangerous," Johnston observes. "We have been saying for some time that the use of this drug will not turn around until young people begin to see its use as risky, and this year, for the first time, they are finally beginning to see it as more dangerous." The proportion of 12th-graders (the only ones asked about their perceptions of risk for this drug) saying that there is a great risk associated with experimenting with ecstasy jumped by 8 percentage points this year, from 38 percent in 2000 to 46 percent in 2001. [Tables 8 and 9, Figure 5] "I believe this is happening as a result of accumulating evidence about ecstasy's adverse consequences, vigorous efforts by the National Institute on Drug Abuse to disseminate the facts about possible consequences, and extensive media coverage of the drug and its effects," adds Johnston.

At the same time, however, there is a continuing sharp increase in the availability of ecstasy, with the proportion of 12th-graders saying that they could get ecstasy "fairly" or "very" easily, increasing from 40 percent in 1999 to 51 percent in 2000, and then again to 62 percent in 2001. [Tables 12 and 13, Figure 5] "This reflects an extremely rapid spread in availability," comments Johnston, "which is due in part to the fact that this drug is still

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reaching new communities." In 1998 only 53 percent of the schools in the 12th-grade national sample had any survey respondent who had used ecstasy; but this proportion rose to 66 percent by 2000, and reached 72 percent of the schools by 2001. "Thus, even if fewer students are willing to use ecstasy in the schools where it has been present, that decline very likely has been more than offset by the continuing rapid diffusion of the drug to additional areas," Johnston concludes.

The use of ecstasy has reached many demographic subgroups, according to the study results, but it is much less favored among African-American students than among white and Hispanic students. To illustrate, among 12th-graders only 2 percent of African-American students report using ecstasy in the prior year compared to 10 percent of both white and Hispanic students. "In fact, hallucinogenic drugs generally have not been nearly as popular among African-American students as they have been among whites and Hispanics," Johnston states. "The same holds true for inhalants."

Ecstasy is only one of the many illicit drugs covered by the study. A number of the others held relatively steady this year, but a few showed important changes:

Heroin: After a long period of increase, heroin use finally began to decrease among 10th- and 12th-graders in 2001. [Tables 1, 2 and 4-7, Figure 8] "These declines were substantial and highly statistically significant," according to Johnston. For example, the proportion of 10th-graders reporting any use of heroin in the prior 12 months fell from 1.4 percent in 2000 to 0.9 percent in 2001, while the comparable statistic for 12th-graders fell from 1.5 percent to 0.9 percent over the same interval. (Among 8th-graders the turn-around in heroin use began last year, although there was little further improvement this year.) All of this year's improvement came in the form of heroin use that does not involve the use of a needle---in other words, smoking or snorting it. While the degree of risk associated with heroin use has not risen much in the past few years, it remains at quite high levels.

Inhalants: The use of inhalant drugs, including solvents and aerosols, continued to decline gradually in all three grades, although the decline reached statistical significance only for 12th-graders. [Tables 1, 2, and 4-7, Figure 3] There has been a steady, gradual

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decline in inhalant use among teens since 1995, as perceived risk has grown. Perceived risk increased further in 2001, which bodes well for continued improvement in the inhalant situation in the future, according to the investigators. [Tables 8 and 9, Figure 3] "We think that the active efforts of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and other organizations to get the word out about the dangers of inhalants have paid off," says Johnston. "We observed an upward shift in this belief in all three grades in 1996, which corresponded to when the Partnership launched an ad campaign on the dangers of inhalants."

LSD: Overall hallucinogen use, and the use of LSD specifically, are below their peak levels reached in 1996 in all three grade levels. [Tables 1, 2, and 4-7, Figure 4] Gradual declines continued in 2001 in the lower grades (only that for 10th-grade was statistically significant), but not in 12th-grade. "We have seen a considerable decline in LSD use over the last five years," states Johnston, "but in this case it is not because youngsters are coming to see the drug as more dangerous." In fact, the opposite has been happening: perceived risk and disapproval of using the drug have actually been declining. [Tables 8-11 and Figure 4] "We think the reduction in LSD use may be occurring because ecstasy is displacing it as a drug of choice. The reported availability of LSD has dropped gradually in recent years, but that could simply be because fewer student have friends who are users." [Tables 12-13 and Figure 4]

Barbiturates and Narcotics Other than Heroin: Use of these two drug classes is reported only for 12th-grade students. Both drug classes had been showing a gradual, long-term increase in use until 2001, when use finally leveled off for both. [Tables 1-3]

Cocaine and Crack: The usage rates for both crack and powder cocaine are below the recent peaks reached in 1998 among the 8th-graders and in 1999 among 10th- and 12th-graders, but only the 10th-graders showed further decline this year. [Tables 1-3 and 4-7, Figures 6 and 7] These recent improvements followed a period of considerable increase in the early 1990s for both forms of cocaine use, although their usage levels never attained the high rates observed during the peak of the cocaine epidemic in the mid-1990s.

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"Like most of the illicit drugs, cocaine and crack showed an increase---or what I have called a 'relapse'---in use early in the 1990s," says Johnston, "but have shown some improvement over the past several years."

Any Illicit Drug Use: At each of the three grade levels, the proportion of students who have used any of the illicit drugs during the prior year is below the recent peaks (attained in 1996 or 1997), but only among the 8th-graders is it appreciably below the peak level. [Tables 1-3 and 4-6, Figure 1] The 8th-graders had shown steady, gradual declines from their 1996 peak rates through 2000, but showed no further decline in 2001. The other two grades showed no declines in 2001 either. This leveling in 2001 is largely due to the fact that usage of marijuana---the most widely used of all of the illicit drugs---itself held steady this year. [Tables 1-3 and 4-7, Figure 2]

Alcohol: Most measures of alcohol use among teens have shown considerable stability since the beginning of the 1990s. [Tables 1-3 and 4-7, Figure 10] However, insofar as there has been change over the past decade, it was in the form of a slight increase for most alcohol-use measures in the early 1990s, reaching peak rates in 1996 or 1997, followed by a slight decrease over the time interval since then. The recent fall-off has been most pronounced among the 8th-graders who, for example, showed a decline in 30-day prevalence of any alcohol use from 26 percent in 1996 to 22 percent in 2001. They also showed a slight decline in the 30-day prevalence of being drunk, which dropped from 10 percent to 8 percent over the same interval.

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Monitoring the Future is funded under an investigator-initiated research grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Surveys of nationally representative samples of American high school seniors were begun in 1975, making the class of 2001 the 27th such class surveyed. Surveys of 8th- and 10th-graders were added to the design in 1991, making the 2001 nationally representative samples the 11th such classes surveyed. The sample sizes in 2001 are 16,800 8th-graders, 14,300 10th-graders, and 13,300 12th-graders, for a total of 44,300 students in all. These students are located in 424 private and public secondary schools across the coterminous United States, selected with probability proportionate to size, to yield nationally representative samples of students in each of the three grade levels.

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The findings summarized here will be published in the forthcoming volume:
Johnston, L.D., O'Malley, P.M., & Bachman, J.G. (2002). *Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2001*. (NIH Publication No. [yet to be assigned].) Bethesda MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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