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Student Attitudes About Drugs Shifting

ANN ARBOR---Despite the increasing proportion of youth who became involved with illicit drugs during the 1970's, the majority of American young people today are still rather conservative about most kinds of drug use. Social psychologists Lloyd Johnston, Jerald Bachman, and Patrick O'Malley report that in their nationwide surveys of high school seniors over three-quarters of these youths disapprove of even experimenting with any of the illicit drugs other than marijuana. Over 90% disapprove of regular use of drugs such as cocaine, heroin, LSD, amphetamines, or barbiturates.

Each year since 1975 these three scientists at The University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research have surveyed 17,000 seniors nationwide as part of an ongoing study entitled "Monitoring the Future." Between 1975 and 1978 they found an increasing proportion of seniors using marijuana, but rather little change in the proportion going on to become involved with some other illicit drug.

"Attitudes regarding marijuana use were definitely softening during the early and mid-1970's," the investigators say. "That trend halted after 1977, though, and attitudes toward regular marijuana use have actually hardened since then." Nearly 70% of the seniors in the most recent survey disapproved of regular use; and 34% disapproved of trying the drug once or twice.

Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley believe that the basic conservatism of most American young people regarding drug use has been underplayed in the media.

They credit the media, however, with contributing to the halt in the rapid rise in daily marijuana use among teenagers. Daily or near-daily use among seniors nearly doubled between 1975 and 1978, from 6% to 11%, but stabilized in 1979 following extensive media coverage of its potential hazards. That coverage may well explain why a significantly larger proportion of the seniors in '79 than in '78 believed that regular marijuana use was risky.

Marijuana is not the only substance about which attitudes and beliefs have been changing. Views on cigarette smoking have become significantly more conservative, according to the investigators. Since 1975 there has been a steady increase in the proportion attributing "great risk" to smoking a pack or more per day (from 51% in 1975 to 63% in 1979). More seniors today also disapprove of regular smoking (70% in 1979), and there is now a downturn in actual smoking among seniors. Daily cigarette use peaked in 1976 and 1977 at 29% and dropped to 25% by 1979. Smoking at the level of half-a-pack or more per day dropped over the same interval from 19.4% to 16.5%. "These shifts, though rather modest to date, could prove important to the health of the American population thirty or forty years hence," state the investigators, "particularly if the downward trend continues."

The picture is a more complicated one for alcohol. Since 1975, daily drinking consistently has met with the disapproval of about two-thirds of all seniors. And the rate of daily or near-daily drinking (6.9% in 1979) has remained fairly constant (and is considerably lower than the comparable statistic for marijuana use—10.3%).

But weekend binge drinking has become acceptable to more seniors. Slightly fewer now report that their friends disapprove of such binge drinking, and more report friends getting drunk at least once a week. When asked whether they personally had taken five or more drinks in a row during the prior two weeks, fully 41% of the seniors in 1979 said that they had, up from 37% in 1975.

"These trends are troublesome and may be due in part to the fact that only about a third of high school seniors associate much risk with this pattern of drinking," state the researchers. "Such an assessment on their part does not seem entirely realistic, given what is known about traffic fatalities, the etiology of alcoholism, and what the seniors themselves tell us about problems stemming from their alcohol use. Perhaps the media can play a similar role in educating American teenagers to the hazards of binge drinking as they did in alerting youth to the potential hazards of daily marijuana use," they state.