

# The NHSDA Report

September 14, 2001

## Beliefs Among Youths About Risks from Illicit Drug Use

### In Brief

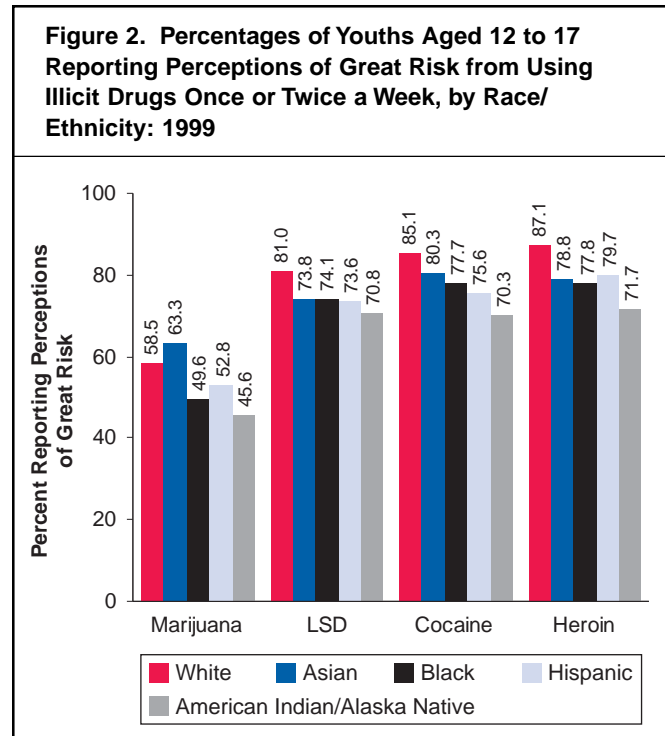
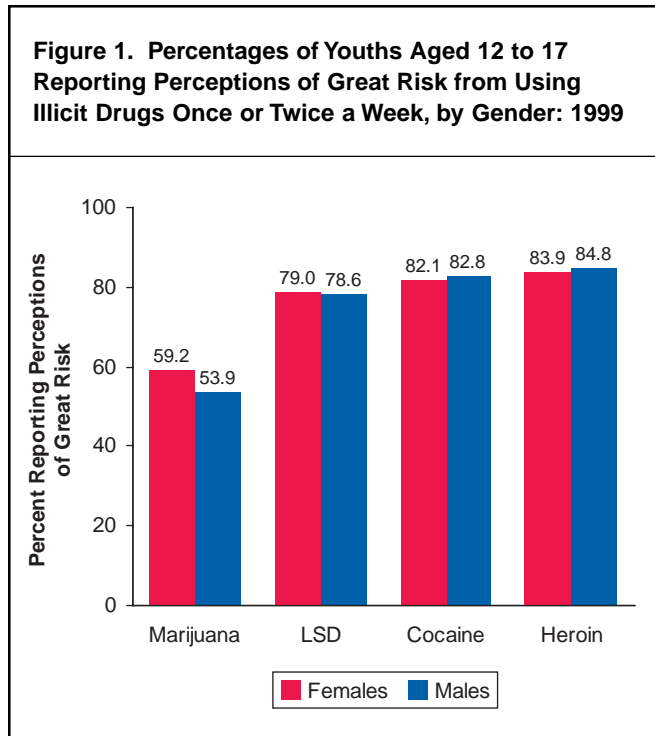
- Most youths aged 12 to 17 perceived great risk from using illicit drugs once or twice a week
- The percentages of youths who perceived great risk from using marijuana or cocaine once or twice a week decreased between 1994 and 1999
- Youths perceiving great risk from using marijuana once or twice a week were less likely to use substances than youths perceiving moderate, slight, or no risk

The 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) asked respondents how much they think people risk harming themselves physically and in other ways when they use illicit drugs. Response choices were: (1) no risk; (2) slight risk; (3) moderate risk; and (4) great risk. Respondents were asked about the risk from using marijuana, LSD, cocaine, or heroin once or twice a week. They were also asked about the risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week.

### Perceptions of Risk

Substance use has been shown to be closely related to the perception of risk associated with use; substance use is generally lower among those who perceive great risk associated with use.<sup>1</sup> Of the estimated 23 million youths aged 12 to 17 in the United States, the 1999 NHSDA indicated that almost 13 million (57 percent) perceived great risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week, 17 million (79 percent) perceived great risk from using LSD once or twice a week, and almost 19 million perceived great risk from using cocaine (82 percent) or heroin (84 percent) once or twice a week.

Females were more likely than males to perceive great risk from using marijuana once or twice a week; however, males and females were about equally as likely to perceive great risk from using LSD (Figure 1). White youths were the most likely of all racial/ethnic groups to perceive great risk from using LSD, cocaine, or heroin



once or twice a week, and they were second most likely to perceive great risk from using marijuana (Figure 2). American Indian/Alaska Native youths consistently were the least likely of racial/ethnic groups to perceive great risk from using these illicit drugs once or twice a week.

### Perceptions of Risk Have Decreased

The percentages of youths who reported perceptions of great risk from using marijuana and cocaine once or twice a week decreased significantly from 1994 to 1999 (Figure 3). For example, almost 59 percent of youths in 1994 perceived great risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week compared to less than 53 percent of youths in 1999. Similarly, 84 percent of youths in 1994 perceived great risk from using cocaine once or twice a week compared to 80 percent of youths in 1999.

### Risk Beliefs and Substance Use

According to the 1999 NHSDA, use of illicit drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol was lower among youths who perceived great risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week than among those who perceived moderate, slight, or no risk (Figure 4). For example, 2 percent of youths who perceived great risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week reported past month use of marijuana/hashish compared with 15 percent of youths who perceived moderate, slight, or no risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week.

### Summary

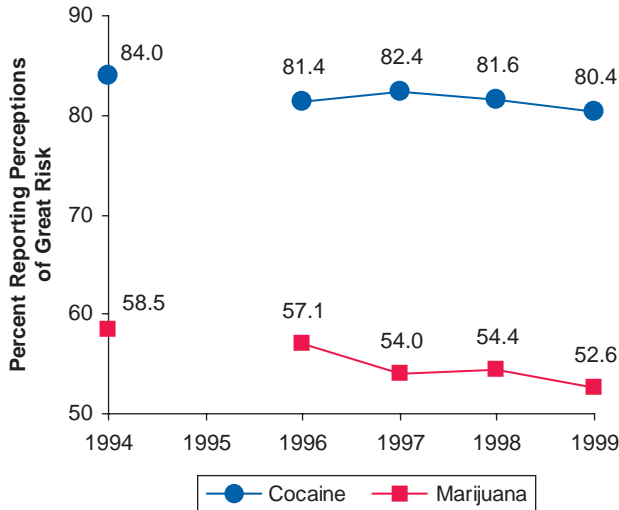
In 1999, a majority of youths aged 12 to 17 perceived great risk from smoking marijuana or using LSD, cocaine, or heroin once or twice a week. Females were more likely than

their male peers to perceive great risk from using marijuana once or twice a week. Although this finding mirrors the lower percentage of females (6.7 percent) than males (7.8 percent) who reported using marijuana in the past month, it is unlikely that any single factor solely accounts for this difference.

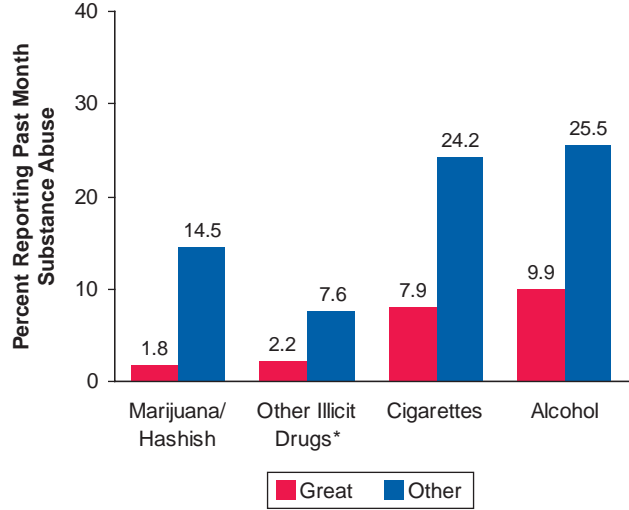
White youths were generally more likely to perceive great risk from using illicit drugs once or twice a week than youths from other racial/ethnic groups. American Indian/Alaska Native youths were less likely than youths from other racial/ethnic groups to perceive great risk. This finding corresponds to the higher percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native youths who reported using illicit drugs in the past month (20 percent) relative to youths from other racial/ethnic groups (white, 10 percent; black, 9 percent; Asian, 7 percent; and Hispanic, 10 percent).

Perceptions of great risk from using marijuana and cocaine once or twice a week significantly

**Figure 3. Percentages of Youths Aged 12 to 17 Reporting Perceptions of Great Risk from Using Illicit Drugs: 1994 to 1999**



**Figure 4. Percentages of Youths Aged 12 to 17 Reporting Past Month Substance Use, by Perceived Risk from Smoking Marijuana Once/ Twice a Week: 1999**



decreased from 1994 to 1999. This finding also mirrors the increasing rate of past month marijuana/hashish use among youths during this time period, from 6 percent in 1994 to 7 percent in 1999, but it is insufficient to provide a complete explanation for the increase. Youths who perceived great risk from smoking marijuana once or twice a week were less likely in 1999 to use substances than youths who perceived less risk (see Figure 4).

**End Note**

1. Bachman, J.G., Johnston, L.D., & O'Malley, P.M. (1998). Explaining recent increases in students' marijuana use: Impacts of perceived risks and disapproval, 1976 through 1996. *American Journal of Public Health, 88*, 887-892.

**Figure Notes**

Fig. 3 – All estimates were derived from paper-and-pencil data collection; 1995 data are not available; 1999 estimates have been adjusted to reflect the 1998 distribution of past NHSDA interviewing experience among field interviewers; differences between 1994 & 1999 estimates are

statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Fig. 4 – Data presented differ from previously published data from the 1999 NHSDA because of corrections made to imputation procedures.

\*Other Illicit Drugs was defined as use at least once of cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens (including PCP and LSD), heroin, or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically, regardless of marijuana/hashish use; marijuana/hashish users who also used any of the other listed drugs are included.

Source (all figures): SAMHSA 1999 NHSDA

The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The 1999 data are based on information obtained from nearly 70,000 persons aged 12 or older. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NHSDA Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Information and data for this issue are based on the following publication and statistics:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000). *Summary of findings*

from the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3466). Rockville, MD: Author.

Also available on-line: <http://www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov>.

Additional tables: 3.4A, 3.4B, 3.6A, 3.6B, 3.8B, 3.10A, 3.10B from [http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol\\_1\\_Part\\_3/V1P3.htm](http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol_1_Part_3/V1P3.htm).

Additional tables: 1.14B, 1.15B, 1.27B from [http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol\\_1\\_Part\\_1/V1P1.htm](http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2kdetailedtabs/Vol_1_Part_1/V1P1.htm).

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000). *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse Main Findings 1998* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3381). Rockville, MD: Author.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1999). *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse Main Findings 1997* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 99-3295). Rockville, MD: Author.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1998). *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse Main Findings 1996* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 98-3200). Rockville, MD: Author.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (1996). *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Main Findings 1994* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 96-3085). Rockville, MD: Author.