



## Decline in teen substance use in 2021 marks largest decrease since 1975

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A new survey found the percentage of adolescents reporting substance use in 2021 decreased significantly from the previous year. Experts called it an unintended effect of the pandemic.

The finding marks the largest decrease in teen drug use since the annual [Monitoring the Future](#) survey began in 1975. The national survey of eighth, 10th and 12th graders is conducted by the University of Michigan (UM) Institute for Social Research and is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

Decreases were noted across many different substances, including the three most commonly used drugs in adolescence: alcohol, marijuana and vaped nicotine. The decrease in vaping marijuana and tobacco comes on the heels of sharp increases in use between 2017 and 2019. Use leveled off in 2020.

Use of the product JUUL also showed significant declines across all grades, but vaping continues to be the predominant method of nicotine consumption among youths.

The percentage of youths who had ever used any illicit drug other than marijuana decreased by more than 25% from 2020 to 2021. Significant declines were found across a wide range of drugs, including cocaine, hallucinogens and nonmedical use of amphetamines, tranquilizers and prescription opioids.

In a webinar releasing the results, Marsha Lopez, Ph.D., M.H.S., chief of the Epidemiology Research Branch in the NIDA Division of Epidemiology, Services and Prevention Research, reflected on the survey's outcomes. "There was an unprecedented number of decreases in drug use among youth reported by this

study. The big question is how do we harness some of the benefits of this protective impact of the pandemic on substance-using behavior without all of the detrimental impacts that we know came along with it?”

It will be crucial to identify the elements of the past year that contributed to the decrease in drug use and whether they are related to drug availability, family involvement or differences in peer pressure, and “harness them to inform future prevention efforts,” NIDA director Nora Volkow, M.D., said in a [news release](#).

### **Methods, limitations**

The survey asked students in eighth, 10th and 12th grades in 319 public and private schools to report their substance use over various time periods. Students also documented their perception of harm, disapproval of use and perceived availability of drugs.

In all, investigators conducted 32,260 surveys from February through June.

Participants were of the following racial/ethnic backgrounds: White (51.2%), Hispanic (16.7%), multiple backgrounds (13.8%), African American (11.3%), Asian (5%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (0.9%),

One limitation of the web-based survey was that 40% of respondents completed it in person in school, and 60% filled it out at home while attending school virtually.

Students taking the survey at home may not have had the same level of privacy or felt as comfortable answering the questions. In addition, those less engaged in school — a risk factor for drug use — may have been less likely to participate.

Investigators conducted additional analyses to confirm that the location had little to no influence on results. They also noted a slight drop in response rates for all age groups.

### **Mental health concerns**

This year, the study also surveyed adolescents’ mental health during the pandemic. Students in all grades reported increases in feelings of boredom, anxiety, depression, loneliness, worry, sleep difficulties and other negative indicators since the pandemic began.

### **Looking ahead**

Besides the ability to see the decline in drug use, the real benefit of the survey is “our unique ability to track changes over time and over the course of history,” Richard A. Miech, Ph.D., team lead of the UM Monitoring the Future study, said in the news release. “We knew that this year’s data would illuminate how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted substance use among young people, and in the coming years, we will find out whether those impacts are long-lasting as we continue tracking the drug use patterns of these unique cohorts of adolescents,” Dr. Miech concluded.

### **Resources**

- [Monitoring the Future study](#)
- [Data tables from study](#)
- [AAP policy \*Substance Use Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment for Pediatricians\*](#)
- [AAP policy \*E-Cigarettes and Similar Devices\*](#)
- [AAP policy \*Clinical Practice Policy to Protect Children from Tobacco, Nicotine and Tobacco Smoke\*](#)
- [AAP Tobacco Control and Prevention website](#)
- [AAP E-cigarette and Vaping Curriculum](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org about vaping](#)

