

Name of study: The prevalence of illicit drug use among youth: results from the Australian School Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey,

Authors: Michael Lynskey et al.

Publication: Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 1999 Vol. 23, #5.

Aim: to report on the prevalence of cannabis, hallucinogen, amphetamine, cocaine, ecstasy, opiate, and steroid use among 12-17 year old youth in schools in Australia.

Method: the illegal drug questions were a part of a larger survey of tobacco, alcohol and other drug use conducted in 1996. A representative sample of all Australian schools was identified – a number of schools chose not to participate; two others did not allow their students to complete the section on illicit drug use. With non-participating schools being replaced with a replacement sample, student participation in this part of the survey was 91% (close to 30,000 students). Students completed a pencil and paper questionnaire, in most cases without the presence of their teacher.

Results:

- Cannabis was, by far, the most widely reported illicit drug used with 40% of all students having ever used it;
- next most used were hallucinogens (8.6%) and amphetamines (6.1%);
- only a small proportion of students reported ever using opiates (3.7%), cocaine (3.6%), ecstasy (3.6%), and steroids (1.8%)
- there are sharp age differences between age 12 and 16 at which prevalence levels off;
- Males were more more likely to use all substances (except opiates at age 13 [3.5 % of both males and females]).

Authors' Comments: The authors speculate that the levelling off at around age 16 may be due to the fact that at 16, students are legally permitted to leave school and that substance users may be more likely to leave school early—lowering the proportion of users among 16-17 year old students as they do so.

Reviewer's Comments: A general student drug use survey can be quite useful to those designing substance abuse prevention programming. Some thoughts on programming implications arising from this survey:

Age of first use: More than one in ten students aged 12 years had used cannabis at some point. This suggests that cannabis education really needs to begin prior to age 12. Alcohol and tobacco use are not reported in this survey, however these substances tend to be used at a younger age than cannabis, and hence should be the focus of perhaps earlier attention.

Age differences: Through ages 12-15, a majority of Australian youth had not used any of the illegal substances. It is important to point out to these students that not using any of the illegal substances is the norm in their age group nationally. At ages 16 and 17, a majority of Australian youth has used cannabis at least once. Programming that includes strategies and messages to reduce harm would make sense for this population (e.g., don't use while playing sports or studying).

Gender differences: a greater percentage of males reported use of each substance at each age with the exception of opiate use at age 13 (3.5% of both males and females reported use). Males were also more likely to report heavy use of virtually all substances, so any opportunity to present programming or messages that will appeal to males would make sense.

Frequent use: 6.8% of males and 3.1% of female reported using cannabis more than 40 times in the past year. A smaller proportion of Australian students reported frequent use of other substances. It is important to try to identify these students and to make them aware of resources in their school and community that can help reduce harm.