

Record Declines in U.S. Adolescent Drug Use during the Pandemic:
2021 Results from Monitoring the Future

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Monitoring the Future

- An ongoing series of surveys of American adolescents, college students, and adults since 1975
- Conducted by a team of social scientists at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, Survey Research Center
- Funded by the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse
- Under competitive research grants reviewed every 5 years



Monitoring the Future

- Major goals of the project are:
 - To document short- and long-term changes in U.S. adolescent, population drug use
 - To test competing explanations for why these changes (or lack of changes) took place



Sampling

- To address these goals we need **representative** data
 - A sample of **all** U.S. adolescents
 - A *random* draw
- Results are what we would find if we surveyed all 12 million U.S. 8th, 10th, and 12th graders U.S, + or - a percentage point or two.
- Other statistics that come from random samples include the Unemployment Rate, Consumer Confidence Index...



Monitoring the Future

- Separate, nationally representative, annual surveys of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students
 - Sampled from a list of all public and private schools in the U.S. (under guidance of a professional sampling statistician)
 - Approximately 40,000 students total in about 410 public and private secondary schools per year (when no pandemic)
 - As of 2021, more than 1.5 million completed surveys
 - That being said, it is the representativeness of the data and not the large sample size that is the key characteristic



Monitoring the Future

- Contents covered include:
 - Prevalence of drug use
 - Perceived risk of drug use
 - Disapproval of drug use
 - Perceived availability of drug use
 - Demographics/family structure
 - Religious attendance
 - School experiences



Adolescent Drug Use Before and After the Pandemic

- In 2020 MTF collected data from ~10,000 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students before schools shut down on March 15, 2020
- MTF was able to do a full survey from February – June of 2021, and collected ~30,000 surveys.



2021 Results

- Large declines in prevalence across the board for most drugs, for lifetime, past 12-month, and past 30-day use
 - Consistent with social distancing policies that were intentionally designed to limit adolescent interactions with others outside their home
 - These include:
 - School building closures
 - Reductions/cancellations of after school group activities
 - Physical distancing policies requiring all to stay six feet apart



2021 Results

- Large declines in prevalence across the board for most drugs, for lifetime, past 12-month, and past 30-day use
 - Consistent with social distancing policies that were intentionally designed to limit adolescent interactions with others outside their home
 - Consequences include:
 - Reduced exposure to peer pressure to use drugs
 - Reduced access to drugs (e.g. through friends and adults)
 - Fewer opportunities to use drugs free from parental supervision (e.g. at parties or informal social gatherings)



Results

Go to: <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/data/21data.htm>

Or click [here](#)



Results

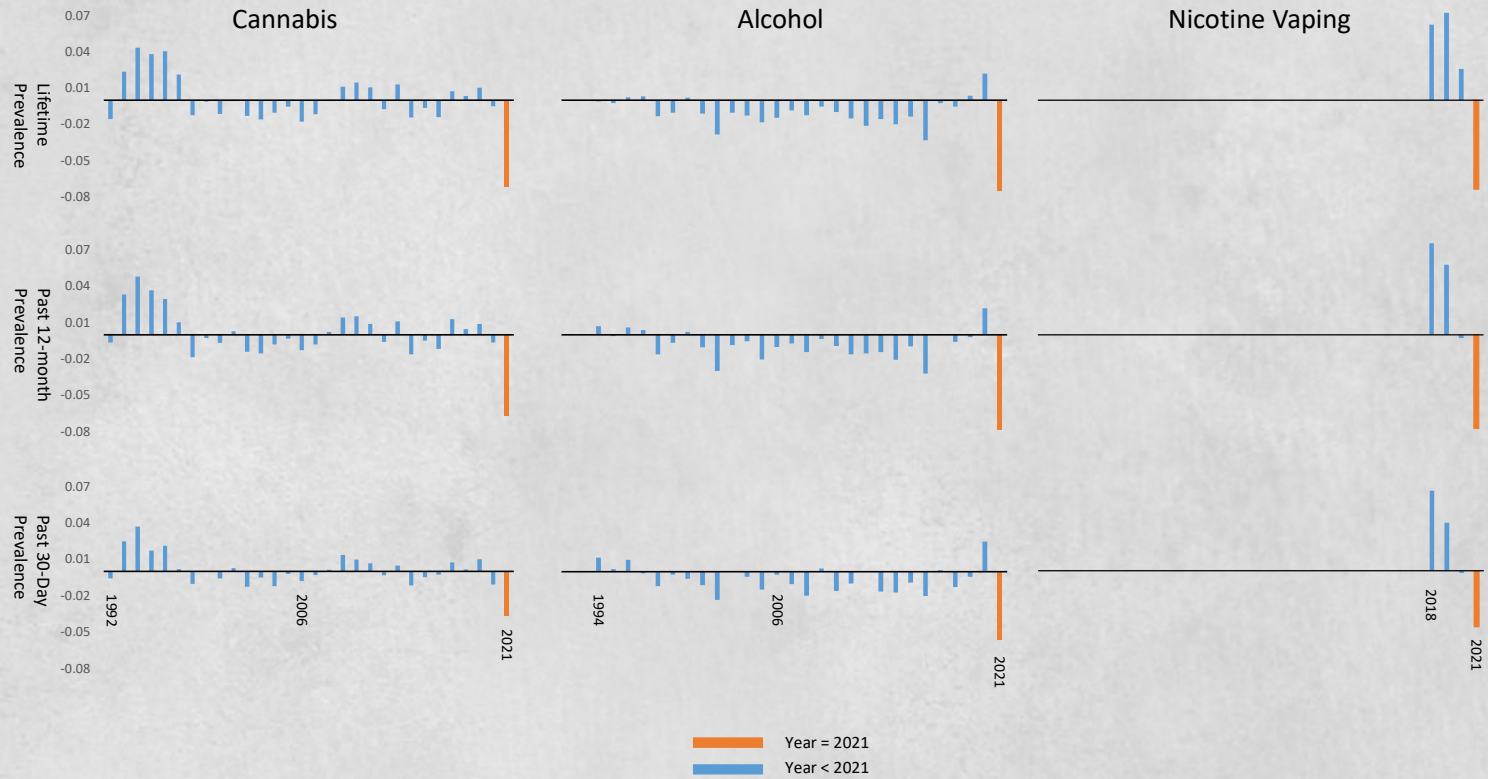


Figure 1: Absolute Change in Substance Use Prevalence Compared to Previous Year, by Substance and Reporting Interval (8th, 10th, and 12th grades combined)



Results – summary

- Largest one-year declines in marijuana prevalence ever recorded by the survey for lifetime, 12-month, and 30-day use in 2021.
 - Exception is 30-day use in 12th grade, which was 2nd-largest decline ever recorded
- Largest one-year declines in nicotine vaping prevalence ever recorded by the survey for lifetime, 12-month, and 30-day use in 2021.
- Largest one-year declines in alcohol prevalence ever recorded by the survey for lifetime, 12-month, and 30-day use in 2021



Results – summary

- Declines in 2021 initiation drove declines in other reporting intervals (e.g. 12-month and 30-day use)
 - Taking into account 2021 declines in initiation, 2021 declines in the other reporting intervals are not statistically significant (analysis not shown here)



Conclusions

- Year 2021 was a grand, national experiment in delayed onset of adolescent drug use
 - Many adolescents who would have otherwise used substances did not do so in 2021
 - Allows unprecedented analysis of the social factors that predict delayed adolescent onset of drug use
 - Allows unprecedented analysis of the consequences of delayed adolescent onset of drug use
 - Will these adolescents “catch up” in their drug use behaviors?
 - Does a delayed onset of drug use in adolescence result in a lifelong reduction of drug use?



Conclusions

- Adolescent drug use was quite robust in 2021, during the pandemic
 - Drug prevalence declined about one quarter in just one year, but it did not decline to zero.
 - Population controls on adolescent interactions were perhaps the strictest they have ever been in decades, and yet much of adolescent drug use continued
 - Difficult to imagine stricter controls
 - 2021 a type of theoretical maximum for short-term policies aimed at reduction of supply and use opportunities?



Conclusions

- Thank you to the organizers for this opportunity to present findings from Monitoring the Future!

