

How Substance Use Differs Among American Secondary Schools

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This research examined variation in substance use by secondary school students. Data was gathered from 1991-2002 by Michigan's Monitoring the Future project; between 42,000 and 49,000 students were sampled annually. Questions concerned use of and attitudes toward cigarettes, alcohol and illegal drugs by 8th, 10th and 12th graders. School characteristics were divided into public, private, Catholic or non-Catholic private, size, race/ethnicity, and average parental education as a proxy for socioeconomic status (SES). Most variance occurred within rather than between schools.

Key Findings

- Eighth graders had the lowest rates and 12th graders the highest use rates for all substances except inhalants, where the reverse was true.
- Cigarettes and alcohol were most commonly used.
- Marijuana was the most used illicit substance and heroin, the least commonly used substance.
- Illicit drug use increased sharply through 1997, then decreased until 2002.
- Among 8th and 10th graders, public schools showed the highest rates of cigarette and most illicit drug use; Catholic schools had higher rates than non-Catholic private schools. By 12th grade there were no significant differences.
- Alcohol and marijuana use were similar, with public school 8th graders having the highest use rates and Catholic schools having higher rates than non-Catholic. By 12th grade, Catholic schools had the highest rates of use.
- Inhalant use did not vary by school type and school size was insignificant.
- Among 8th graders, SES had a negative association with substance use; among 10th graders no association; and among 12th graders a positive association with substance use.
- The majority of African-American schools had the lowest use rates at all grades.

The authors emphasized that analyses focusing on "good" and "bad" schools, on racial composition, SES, or generalized public/private school divides are overly simplistic. Prevention programs that address individual risk are necessary.