



TEENS, DRUGS & VIOLENCE

••• A SPECIAL REPORT •••

OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teens who use drugs are more likely to engage in violent behavior, steal, abuse other drugs, and join gangs.
- Early use of marijuana – the drug most widely used by teens – is a warning sign for later gang involvement.
- Teens who participate in gangs are more likely to be involved in violent acts and drug use.
- Structured activities and volunteering help keep teens away from drugs.
- Parents are the most powerful influence on their kids when it comes to using illicit drugs.

Scientists examine behaviors such as drug use, violence, and participation in gangs in a paradigm of risk and protective factors. Risk factors, such as aggressive behavior and having friends who use drugs, can increase a person's chance for risky behaviors, while protective factors, such as secure family and community environments, can reduce the risk. Risk and protective factors exist on individual, family, peer, school, and community levels. Researchers stress that it is the accumulation of protective factors that have the most positive effect on teens in the long run in protecting against drug use or violent behavior. ¹

This report examines the relationship of teen drug use and violence and the risk and protective factors that parents and communities can take to keep their teens safe and drug-free.

VIOLENCE

Teens who use drugs are more likely to engage in violent behavior, steal, use other drugs, and join gangs. In the past year, youth* who used an illicit drug were almost twice as likely to have engaged in a violent behavior as those who did not use an illicit drug. ² And one in four teens (27%) who abused illicit drugs in the past year report attacking others with the intent to harm. ³

Methamphetamine, marijuana, and prescription pain relievers are among the most abused drugs by teens who acted violently. ⁴ The more drugs a teenager uses, the greater the tendency to engage in violent behavior. ⁵

Nearly one in six teens (17%) who got into serious fights at school or work in the past year reported using drugs. ⁶ Among those teens engaging in violent acts during the past year, most were 13, 14, and 15 years old. ⁷

Research shows that teens are most likely to commit violent crimes during the after school hours between 3:00 – 7:00 p.m. The rate of violent acts committed during this period is nearly six times greater than the rate committed during night time hours (10:00 p.m. – 6:00 a.m.). ⁸

Adolescents represent approximately 14% of the general population, yet they comprise about 31% of the victims of violence, and teens are twice as likely as any other age group to be victims of violent crime. ⁹

* Youth refers to the 12 to 17-year-old age group.

Teen crime victims are also at a greater risk of doing poorly in school, abusing drugs or alcohol, having problems eating or sleeping, being victimized, and perpetrating violent crime themselves.¹⁰

DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR

Teens who use drugs, particularly marijuana, are more likely to steal and experiment with other drugs and alcohol than non-users. Teens who report current and regular marijuana use are nine times more likely than non-users to experiment with other illegal drugs or alcohol, and five times more likely to steal.¹¹

Teens are more likely to steal or shoplift during critical after school hours between 3:00 – 6:00 p.m.¹² More than one in three teens (39%)

who reported currently using illicit drugs have stolen or tried to steal something worth more than \$50 in the past year, compared with one in 11 (9%) of those who had not.¹³ Violent acts by teens are also linked to how frequently a teen smokes marijuana. Research shows that the instances of physically attacking people, destroying property, and stealing increase in direct proportion to the frequency with which teens smoke marijuana.¹⁴

GANGS

*Teens who participate in gangs are more likely to be involved in violent acts and drug use.*¹⁵ Early use of marijuana – the drug most widely used by teens – is a warning sign for later gang involvement.¹⁶ Gang members are more likely to engage in criminal activity and

substance abuse than their peers.¹⁷ Other than alcohol, marijuana is the most widely used substance in gang life.¹⁸ Children who use marijuana are nearly four times more likely to join gangs.¹⁹ Being a member of a gang dramatically increases a teen's risk of being a victim of violence, not just a perpetrator.²⁰

Most gang members are male (94%). Gang members are primarily Hispanic (49%), followed by African-American (37%), Caucasian (8%), and Asian (5%).²¹ In 2004, one in three gang members were 15, 16, or 17 years old. Studies find that youth are most likely to join a gang at age 15 or 16. Teens are particularly at risk of joining a gang at age 15, during the transition to high school.²²

Teens join gangs for a variety of reasons. Some seek excitement; others are looking for prestige, protection, income, or a sense of belonging.²³ Other reasons teens join gangs include unstable family living conditions, the availability of drugs and alcohol, parents who tolerate or commit violence, falling behind or failing in school, and hanging out with delinquents. The more of these risk factors children are exposed to, the more likely they are to join a gang during adolescence.²⁴

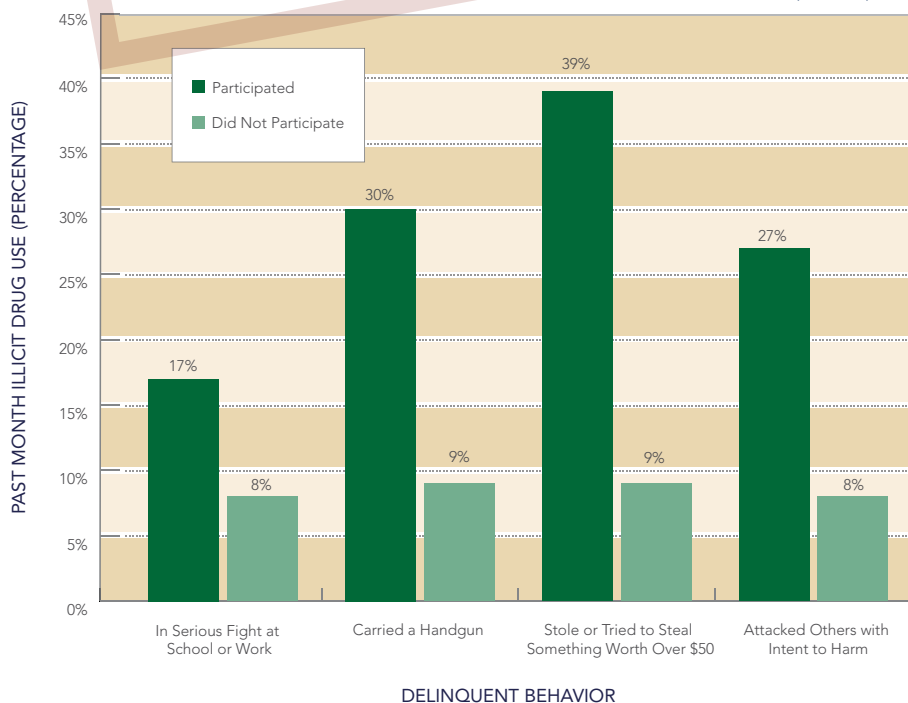
AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES AND VOLUNTEERING

Structured activities and volunteering can help keep teens away from drugs, violence, and smoking while also boosting success in school. Millions of children and teens spend the hours after school unsupervised.²⁵ After school programs, whether run by schools, churches, or other community groups, provide positive environments where teens have the opportunity



**PAST MONTH ILLICIT DRUG USE AMONG YOUTHS (12-17)
BY PARTICIPATION IN FIGHTING AND DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR**

Source: NSDUH, SAMHSA, 2006



to participate in challenging activities. After school programs can provide a safe haven where adolescents can participate in after school activities with their peers.²⁶

Teens who participate in activities between the hours of 3:00 – 7:00 p.m. are more likely to abstain from drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes. Research also reflects that teens who are supervised or involved in structured activities during after school hours are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as abusing drugs and alcohol, and carrying weapons, than youth who are unsupervised during those hours.²⁷ Research shows that participation in after school activities leads to better grades and better behavior in teens.²⁸ Nearly 20% of teens who were not involved in any activities reported current** use of illicit drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes compared with only 12% who were involved in one to three activities.²⁹

More than half of teens (52%) say they wish more after school activities were available in their neighborhood or community. Six in 10 teens (62%) unsupervised during the week say they would likely participate in after school programs if they were available. More than half of teens (54%) said they would watch less television or play fewer video games if they had other things to do after school.³⁰

Students who volunteer do better in school.³¹ Research also shows that teens who volunteer are nearly three times as likely to believe they can make a great deal of difference in their community.³² Last year, nearly one in three 12 to 18-year-old-students (10.6 million) volunteered nationwide.³³

Parents are the most powerful influence on their kids when it comes to using illicit drugs. Two-thirds of teens say upsetting their parents or losing their respect is one of the main reasons

they don't smoke marijuana or use other drugs.³⁴ Youth who felt their parents did not strongly disapprove of marijuana use were about six times more likely to use marijuana than youth who felt their parents would disapprove.³⁵

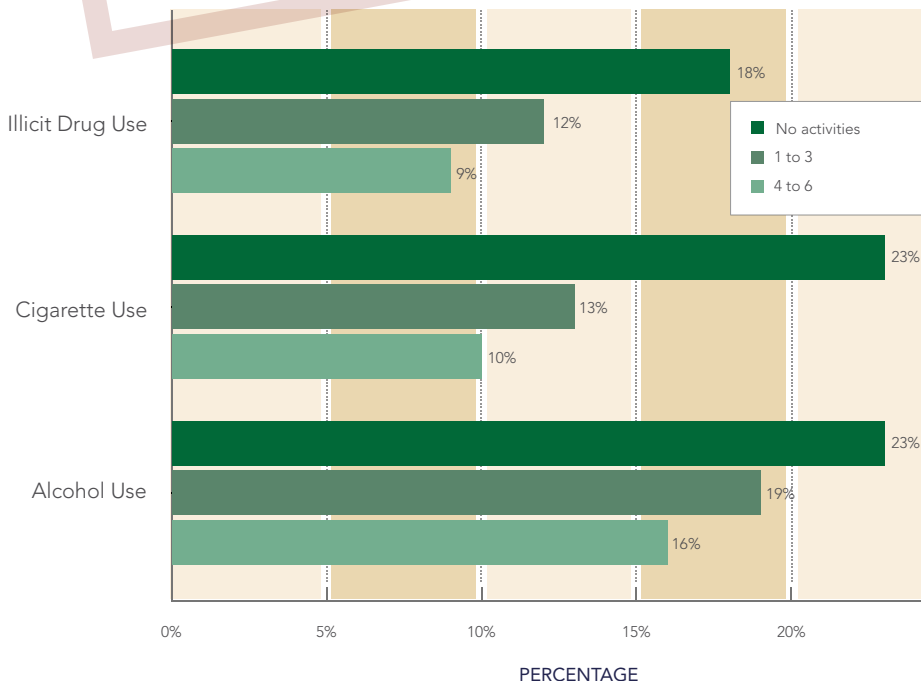
Teens who are engaged with their family or community are less likely to turn to drugs or violence.³⁶ Adolescents who abstain from marijuana use function better than drug users during the transition to young adulthood.³⁷ Family members, especially parents or primary caregivers, play a significant role in helping protect teens from violence by emphasizing the importance of education and offering support and affection.³⁸

Communities also play a role in establishing positive environments for teens. By creating opportunities for teens to participate in activities where they have choices, they can develop conflict-resolution and critical-thinking skills, which protect teens from violence, delinquency, and antisocial behavior.³⁹ Such experiences help them to develop new skills and build character.⁴⁰



PERCENTAGES OF YOUTHS (12-17) WHO REPORTED CIGARETTE, ALCOHOL, AND ILLICIT DRUG USE IN THE PAST MONTH, BY NUMBER OF PAST YEAR ACTIVITIES

Source: NSDUH, SAMHSA, 2006



** Current use means use of an illicit drug or alcohol during the month prior to the survey interview.

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