

Drug Early Warning System

Working Together to Identify Emerging Drug Trends in Maryland

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DEWS News

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The Maryland Drug Scan Summer 2000 Report

The Summer 2000 Maryland Drug Scan survey of 132 substance abuse professionals showed that ecstasy is of increasing concern in several counties. Substance abuse professionals believe that ecstasy has emerged as the premiere “club drug,” while other “designer” drugs have lost popularity. Interviews from some counties suggest that ecstasy use has spread beyond the “rave” subculture to the general youth and young adult population.

According to other Drug Scan results, many professionals believe that heroin use is increasing, particularly among females, and that the heroin currently being sold is purer than that formerly available.

Analysis of the survey results has caused DEWS to upgrade heroin from an “emerging” drug to a “primary” drug in five counties. The affected counties are Baltimore, Calvert, Cecil, Frederick, and

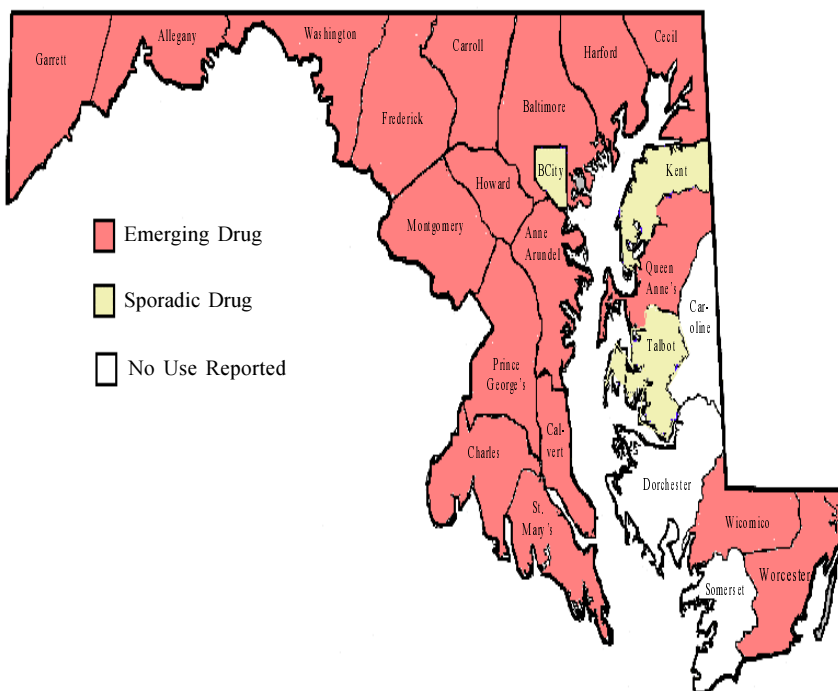
Wicomico. Including these five counties, heroin is now considered a primary drug in eight Maryland areas. Other affected areas are Baltimore City and Carroll and Prince George’s counties.

Crack cocaine has apparently diminished in popularity. Many DEWS contacts noted that crack users are now stigmatized as “crack heads” and that many drug users did not want to be associated with this image. Some said they would not smoke crack for this reason.

Alcohol and marijuana are still perceived to be primary drugs among Marylanders. While the popularity of these drugs has apparently not increased, some contacts noticed alcohol and marijuana use among very young populations.

(“Drug Scan,” continued on back page)

Perceptions of Ecstasy Use in Maryland Counties, 2000



SOURCE: DEWS, Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR), University of Maryland at College Park.

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What Young Offenders Are Saying



The OPUS (Offender Population Urinalysis Screening) Intake Study interviews youths in juvenile justice facilities to obtain data on emerging trends in drug use. The following are summaries of youths' views of drug use by their peers. Two counties will be featured each newsletter.

Frederick County

Marijuana

In Frederick County, marijuana can be easily obtained. Recreational use of the drug in school seems to be becoming more prevalent. Most of the interviewees considered marijuana to be harmless, and they identified it as a commonly used drug in their communities. According to a 16-year-old male, fourth graders are the youngest age group using marijuana and sixth graders are the youngest group selling marijuana. Several other youth also reported that children begin smoking marijuana at ages as young as nine and ten. Marijuana is sometimes laced with other drugs, such as coke, opium, or PCP, or household products, such as Raid.

Ecstasy

Most of the youth interviewed had not even heard of ecstasy as little as six months to a year ago. They now feel the drug is easily available and increasingly popular in Frederick County. Interviewees tended to associate ecstasy use with raves and nightclubs, but they also reported that the drug is commonly used at house parties or small get-togethers. According to interviewees, teenagers are also buying and sometimes using it during school hours. Many of the youth attributed the popularity of this drug to the increased sexual arousal it is believed to produce. A few warned that it "puts a hole in your brain." Ecstasy pills cost from \$20 to \$30 per pill. The majority of the youth interviewed believe that every pill also contains other drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, or speed.

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LSD

Many of the youth identified acid as being easily available in Frederick County. The drug appears to be most popular among white, upper-middle-class teens. Although the youth provided little information about the effects of LSD, they offered extensive descriptions of the forms in which it is available and the settings in which it is being used. While LSD is popular at raves, clubs, and house parties, many interviewees reported that acid use is growing increasingly common in Frederick County schools. It is available in gel tab, liquid, or paper forms. One hit costs between \$5 and \$7. The youth also mentioned a drug called boat, acid mixed with marijuana, and "candy-flipping" (a practice of mixing acid with ecstasy).

Cecil County

Heroin

Most of the youth interviewed agreed that heroin use is most prevalent among sixteen- to twenty-five-year-olds. Dropouts and antisocial, poor, and unpopular youths were described as "typical" users. Youth agree that heroin use is on the rise. As one seventeen-year-old male reported, "It's an epidemic." Heroin reportedly is packaged in wax paper and plastic bags. Blue bags cost around \$10. Red bags are considered more potent and cost around \$15. One youth reported that heroin is available for as little as \$5, sometimes with a second hit free. Initially, users snort heroin, but its addictive nature quickly moves users to intravenous use. According to an eighteen-year-old male, 75 percent of users shoot up and 25 percent snort heroin. Several of the youth mentioned that IV users are sharing needles.

Ecstasy

Ecstasy use in Cecil County, according to the youth interviewed, is widespread among the adolescent population. According to one youth, the drug was almost unheard of just last September. In the past few months, however, the popularity and availability of ecstasy has dramatically increased. Some youths reported that it is now more accessible than marijuana. Ecstasy is used by "everybody and anybody" and is not limited to any particular social scene. Several interviewees did mention that users tend to be females. Pills are usually pink or blue and cost anywhere from \$10 to \$30. There are countless different brands, but according to one youth, X-Files is the strongest. Youths provided detailed descriptions of the euphoric sensations and sensory changes that ecstasy users experienced, but they did not seem aware of the dangerous effects of the drug.

Crystal Meth

Although not as prevalent as marijuana or ecstasy, crystal meth does appear to be emerging within this jurisdiction. It is available in pills or yellow powder and is usually snorted or injected. It is reportedly packaged in bottles, baggies, or wax paper; prices range from \$20 to \$40 for half a gram. A fourteen-year-old male reported that people use it "when they are in a bad mood" and on Friday mornings to "get their system going."



Ecstasy

An Emerging Drug of Abuse in Maryland

DEWS researchers have been tracking ecstasy use since mid-1999. Ecstasy is no longer just a club drug. It has now been reported as an emerging drug in 18 jurisdictions, and it is spreading to the general teen and young adult population. The Maryland State Police report that ecstasy cases increased more than four-fold from 13 in 1998 to 59 in 1999. As of September 16, 2000, there were already 76 cases. The National Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) reports for the Baltimore metro area show a sharp jump in ecstasy-related emergency room episodes--from 6 in 1998 to 35 in 1999.

• What is Ecstasy?

Ecstasy or MDMA (methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is a stimulant that combines the properties of methamphetamines or "speed" with those of hallucinogens. It is also known as X-Files, Mitsubishi, Triple Stacks, 007, and the Love Drug. It is usually taken in tablet or capsule form. Pills may contain other drugs such as methadone, ketamine, cocaine, heroin, LSD, or other (sometimes lethal) byproducts of the drug manufacturing process. Pills sell for between \$7 and \$30. According to DEA reports, a majority of the ecstasy sold in the United States is manufactured in the Netherlands and smuggled to local dealers by couriers. Items associated with ecstasy use include pacifiers, eye droppers, painter's masks, and bottled water.

• What Are the Effects of Ecstasy Use?

Ecstasy causes the brain to release serotonin, a neurotransmitter that helps control mood. Users often experience euphoria, enhanced mental and emotional clarity, and heightened sensory perceptions. When the drug wears off, in three to six hours, the user's brain has been depleted of serotonin. This can contribute to depression and harm parts of the brain responsible for thought and memory. Because users feel energetic, many dance until they are dehydrated. This has led to deaths from heat exhaustion and kidney and cardiovascular system failure. It has also led to heart attacks, strokes, and seizures in some users. Recent studies with humans and baboons (NIDA Notes Vol. 114, No. 4) revealed that repeated ecstasy use has an adverse effect on serotonin levels in the brain. Brain damage was still present in monkeys seven years after drug use stopped. A human study comparing 24 users to 24 non-users shows significant impairment in visual and verbal memory more than two weeks after use.

• Who Uses It?

While ecstasy emerged in nightclubs and "raves," many youth interviewed as part of the OPUS Intake Study, which screens juvenile offenders across the state, have reported that it is no longer just a club drug. Youths now use it while just "hanging out." A youth offender in Montgomery County reported that ecstasy is called the "happy drug" and is used by depressed youths as well as those looking to enhance sexual feelings.

The youth offenders interviewed first started hearing about the drug in mid-to-late 1999 and now report a long list of slang names and brand preferences. For instance, Baltimore County youth offenders reported that Triple Stacks are the best and 69s are the cheapest. Some youth also reported mixing ecstasy with ketamine or "candy flipping" (mixing ecstasy with acid).

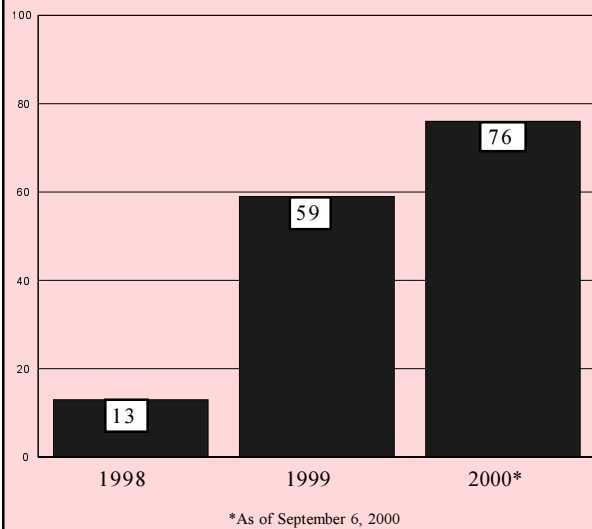
For more information on ecstasy and other drugs, please call the toll free number at 1-877-234-DEWS (3397).

Many questions about ecstasy are currently being investigated as part of a CESAR study to identify ecstasy use rates among high-risk groups. In addition to self-reported drug use data, researchers are collecting biological samples to measure ecstasy use. To date, 219 juvenile offenders and 62 rave attendees have been surveyed, and data collection from a sample of college students is now underway.

Results will be available in late October.



Maryland State Police Crime Laboratory MDMA (Ecstasy) Cases, 1998-2000



NOTE: This graph represents only those cases processed by the Maryland State Police Crime Laboratory. Prince George's, Montgomery, Anne Arundel, and Baltimore counties as well as Baltimore City do not use State Police labs. Data from these counties were not included in this graph.

SOURCE: Maryland State Police, Criminal Intelligence Division.

(*"Drug Scan," continued from front page*)

Some substance abuse professionals also believe that alcohol abusers are buying malt liquor for a more intense high.

Despite the continued popularity of alcohol, many contacts feel that progress has been made in increasing DWI arrests and promoting awareness of the legal penalties of driving under the influence. Contacts perceived a decrease in the number of people driving under the influence in virtually all counties.

In addition to outlining perceived drug abuse issues, the study also catalogued suggestions for coping with drug abuse problems. Respondents commonly emphasized a need for more and better education for kids and parents; stricter laws; changes in permissive attitudes toward so-called "soft" drugs; and more prevention and treatment programs.

The 2000 Drug Scan surveyed professionals from fields including law enforcement, drug treatment and prevention, Safe and Drug Free Schools programs, and hospital emergency departments. This statewide, county-level drug use study asked contacts open-ended questions about their perceptions of local substance abuse problems.

Originally developed as a modified National Pulse Check, the Maryland Drug Scan now has more reporters within Maryland than the National Pulse Check has for the entire nation.

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