

DEWS COUNTY SNAPSHOT

HOWARD COUNTY

JULY 2003

DRUG USE IN HOWARD COUNTY: OVERVIEW

- Juvenile heroin mentions in Howard County decreased 67 percent between fiscal years 1998 and 2002, but the use of other opiates (like OxyContin and Percodan) is reportedly increasing.
- Adult other opiates mentions increased by 87 percent between fiscal years 1998 and 2002 (from 47 to 88). "Other opiates" is a category that includes narcotics like oxycodone, morphine and Percodan, but excludes heroin and methadone.
- Although the percentage of youth mentioning marijuana as a substance of abuse decreased from 96 percent in 2000 to 86 percent in 2002, marijuana remained the most prevalent substance of abuse mentioned by juveniles on admission to treatment.
- Approximately two-thirds of adults and juveniles mentioned alcohol as a substance of abuse on admission to treatment in FY 2002, and more than one-half of Howard County seniors reported current use.
- Approximately one in twenty of Howard County 12th graders reported current use of narcotics (5 percent), designer drugs (5 percent) and amphetamines (6 percent) in 2001.

NOTEWORTHY FINDINGS

Heroin and Other Opiates

Although heroin was mentioned by a couple of OPUS youth in Howard County, OxyContin and Percocet were the drugs cited as popular among juveniles by both OPUS and Drug Scan contacts. One youth reported that Percocet users crushed the pills and snorted them. OPUS juveniles reported that OxyContin was obtained from acquaintances prescribed the drug, or from drug users who sold it. These youth also reported that OxyContin was sometimes used with marijuana.

Drug Scan contacts were knowledgeable about OxyContin and heroin use in the county. Health department officials who were interviewed reported that use of synthetic opiates (e.g., oxycodone, percodan) was increasing, and that the drugs were easy to obtain. One contact maintained that OxyContin users were frequently of a higher socioeconomic status than other drug users, and not often associated with the "drug culture." Reportedly, patients who were addicted initially to OxyContin or Percocet eventually turned to heroin use. Another contact stated that OxyContin and Percocet were prescription drugs favored among youth, along with Zanax and Valium.

A Drug Scan professional reported that the Maryland State Police had received more lab submissions of heroin in 2002 than they had seen in recent years. "A lot of young kids are getting involved," according to this contact. Police reported finding evidence of the drug on kids arrested for other crimes. Urine tests of OPUS juveniles, however, were all negative for heroin, and treatment admissions data for the county revealed a 67% decrease in juvenile heroin mentions on admission to treatment between 1998 and 2002. (Nearly 4 percent of Howard County juveniles admitted to treatment mentioned heroin, and nearly 5 percent mentioned "other opiates" in fiscal year 2002.)

In the 2001 school year, MAS self-reports of high school seniors revealed that nearly 5 percent acknowledged current use of narcotics, (codeine, morphine, methadone, or Percodan)—a category that also includes oxycodone. Approximately 2 percent reported current use of heroin. (These percentages compared to 1998 levels of slightly more than 2 percent of self-reported past-month narcotics use among 12th graders, and a zero level of heroin use.) In 2001, slightly more than 8 percent of 12th graders reported having used narcotics at least once, and nearly 3 percent admitted having used heroin at least once. Current use of narcotics ranged from less than 1 percent to nearly 3 percent among 8th and 10th graders in the county. Sixth graders did not report current use of narcotics.

More than a fourth (26 percent) of Howard County adults admitted to treatment in fiscal year 2002 mentioned heroin as a substance of abuse, and 7 percent mentioned "other opiates." Adult "other opiate" mentions increased 87 percent between fiscal years 1998 and 2002 (from 47 to 88). These findings were consistent with Health Department reports that heroin use among adults in the county was high. Health department officials also reported a shift in use to the middle class. "It [heroin] is a more socially acceptable party drug" than it used to be, according to a law enforcement contact. A treatment professional contended that purity levels might be as high as 65 percent, attracting middle class users who preferred to inhale heroin rather than inject it.

Ecstasy and Amphetamines

Slightly more than 5 percent of 12th graders acknowledged current use of designer drugs (e.g., ecstasy, MDMA). Among 8th and 10th graders, current use of designer drugs ranged from nearly 4 percent to nearly 6 percent. (Sixth graders reported no current use of designer drugs.) Health department officials reported an increase in use by youth, both in treatment and detention. Reportedly, typical users were white teens and young adults. However, one Drug Scan contact maintained that ecstasy use was the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, this contact believed that ecstasy use had increased in the past year.

Several OPUS youth in Howard County maintained that they knew the composition of ecstasy, a claim that youth in other counties have not made. An exception was the youth who stated that users generally didn't know what ecstasy pills contained, and "that's the risk they take." Several OPUS juveniles reported that the age of first experimentation with ecstasy was about 15 or 16. When asked how common ecstasy use was, and who

used it, OPUS youth replied that "it has become more of an everyday thing," and "users are kids who go to clubs, and use is rare in [the] mainstream culture." Six percent of 10th and 12th graders and 4 percent of 8th graders in Howard County reported current use of amphetamines, but less than 1 percent of 6th graders reported current amphetamines use.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Alcohol Abuse in the County

Overall, more clients mentioned alcohol as a substance of abuse on admission to treatment than any other substance. This included nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of adult admissions, which represented a 12 percent increase between fiscal years 1998 and 2002 (from 744 to 831).

Alcohol was cited by a Drug Scan professional as the most prevalent drug used by both adults and juveniles. According to the contact, alcohol was the most prevalent drug used by detention center clients as well. (Juvenile treatment admissions data, however, revealed that in 2002, marijuana was the most frequently mentioned substance of abuse.) Sixty-seven percent of juveniles mentioned alcohol when admitted to treatment in fiscal year 2002.

Maryland Adolescent Survey (MAS) data for 2001 revealed that more than half (52 percent) of Howard high school seniors reported current use of alcohol, compared to 45 percent in 1998. Slightly over a third (34 percent) reported current binge drinking.

Among 8th and 10th graders, current alcohol use ranged from 21 percent to 38 percent, and current binge drinking ranged from 10 percent to 22 percent. Less than 3 percent of 6th graders reported current alcohol use, and less than 1/2 of 1 percent reported current binge drinking.

OPUS juveniles reported that beer and liquor, including vodka and tequila, were among the more popular alcoholic beverages among youth. One juvenile stated that some youth smoked marijuana while drinking alcohol. Typically, alcohol was obtained from older friends or parents. OPUS youth reported that kids began drinking alcohol in middle school, and certainly by high school.

Marijuana Use in Howard County

More than eight out of ten (86 percent) of youth admitted to treatment in Howard County in fiscal year 2002 mentioned marijuana as a substance of abuse. Eighteen percent of all 12th graders in the county reported current use of marijuana, and 42 percent reported having tried marijuana at least once in their lifetime. Among county 6th, 8th and 10th graders, current marijuana use ranged from less than 1 percent of 6th graders to nearly 20 percent of 10th graders.

OPUS juveniles claimed that youth began experimenting with marijuana around the ages of 13 or 14, but that some began using as early as age nine. Use of the substance was reportedly most common during the high school years. The juveniles reported that marijuana might be laced with opium, heroin, LSD, PCP (known as “boat”), cocaine (known as “chronic”), and embalming fluid. One youth stated that some kids sprayed bug spray and Windex on marijuana.

Drug Scan contacts stated that marijuana use was not limited to youth, and that people of all ages used it. One treatment professional said that by the time juveniles began treatment, they had been using daily or at least multiple times per week. The contact said that it appeared that kids were less stigmatized for smoking marijuana than for smoking cigarettes, and that cigarettes were harder to obtain. This contact said that youth often tended to think of marijuana as harmless because it was a “natural” substance.

A treatment professional reported that urinalyses on entry to treatment have revealed THC nanogram levels between 200 and 500; however, levels in one client exceeded 1500. A Drug Scan contact stated that kids know where to buy “hydro—the good stuff.”

Cocaine in the County

Cocaine was the second most prevalent substance of abuse among county adults. Nearly three out of every ten (29 percent) adults in Howard County admitted to treatment mentioned cocaine in fiscal year 2002. Cocaine abuse has remained relatively stable over the past five years, fluctuating between 29 and 31 percent of all adult admissions. (However, total cocaine mentions increased nearly 8 percent between fiscal years 1998 and 2002, from 346 to 372)

Drug Scan contacts concurred that cocaine use had increased in the county. Health Department officials reported that the abuse of the substance was high in the adult population, and very common in detention populations. Another contact reported that cocaine in the county was sometimes laced with Lanocaine, making users think they had “good stuff.”

LSD and Other Hallucinogens in Howard County

More than 7 percent of the county’s juveniles (n=165) mentioned hallucinogens on admission to treatment in fiscal year 2002. In fact, hallucinogens were the third most prevalent substance abused by juvenile treatment clients. Among Howard County 12th graders, more than one in ten (11 percent) admitted having tried LSD and/or other hallucinogens at least once. However, current use of either LSD or other hallucinogens (mescaline, ‘shrooms) was rare: 4 percent or less for grades six through twelve.

OPUS youth reported that LSD was available in several different forms, including paper, sugar cubes, gel tabs, or liquid, and that users sometimes smoked marijuana when using

it. One juvenile reported that some users placed acid on their eyes to enhance its effects. These youth were also familiar with psychedelic mushrooms, known as ‘shrooms. It was reported that use began around age 13 or 14.

OPUS Youth Tell Us Why Kids Use Drugs

“People use to get rid of problems.” (16-year-old)

“Peer pressure—to relax themselves.” (15-year-old)

“They got addicted and can’t stop.” (16-year-old)

“They like the feeling.” (18-year-old)

“To feel better—other people are doing it.” (14-year-old)

“To socialize and to feel good.” (15-year-old)

“(It) makes them feel better.” (13-year-old)

“Nothing to do—they’re bored. To feel better—to escape problems.” (17-year-old)

“To have fun.” (15-year-old)

“They’re depressed. Peer pressure. They think it’s cool. They like the feeling.” (13-year-old)

“To experiment.” (17-year-old)

“Some do it for fun, some do it for depression, some people do it for peer pressure.” (15-year-old)

“They’re easy to get, they give them a feeling they like, and a lot of people are doing it.” (17-year-old)

“Stress. To be hip.” (17-year-old)

Key Terms

OPUS (Offender Population Urinalysis Screening)—Staff conduct interviews with juvenile offenders at county intake centers.

Drug Scan—Staff conduct interviews with professionals in education, criminal justice, prevention, and public health.

MAS (Maryland Adolescent Survey)—A bi-annual survey of drug use by 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders.

Current use is the use of a drug at least once in the past 30 days.

Drug Mentions—The Substance Abuse Management Information System (SAMIS) is maintained by the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration to monitor treatment admissions. Up to three drugs of abuse are noted