



Parents Say, "Other Teens Drink and Use Marijuana— But My Kids Don't"

Drug abuse and alcohol abuse are two of the top 10 health concerns for kids in the eyes of the public, as measured in the most [recent Poll](#) from the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health. One-third of parents believe drug abuse is a big problem for children and teens in their own communities, while one-fifth of parents believe alcohol abuse is a big problem.

Data from the latest [Monitoring the Future study](#) reports that 28% of 10th graders have used marijuana and 52% of 10th graders have drunk alcohol within the last year. In May 2011, the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked parents of teens about their perceptions of marijuana and alcohol use among teens overall and for their own teens.

Parents' Perceptions of Their Own Teens' Use

Among parents of teens 13 to 17 years old, 10% believe their teens have drunk alcohol in the last year, while 5% believe their teens have used marijuana in the last year (Figure 1).

Of note, 15% of parents were unsure about their teens' use of alcohol and 10% were unsure about their teens' marijuana use. Parents' perceptions of their teens' substance use, and whether they were unsure, did not differ by the parents' race/ethnicity.

Parents with older teens were significantly more likely to report higher rates of use by their own teens: for example, for alcohol—23% for 17-year-olds vs 3% for 13- and 14-year-olds; for marijuana—10% for 17-year-olds vs 3% for 13- and 14-year-olds.

These levels of perceived use are substantially below levels of alcohol and marijuana use reported by teens themselves in the most recent Monitoring the Future study (Figure 1). Even if the 'unsure' responses are added to the 'yes' responses from parents, the levels of use do not reach rates reported by teens.

Figure 1. Parents' perceptions versus teens' report of alcohol and marijuana use



*Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2011 for teens 13-17 years
**Source: Monitoring the Future Study, 2010 data regarding 10th graders

Report Highlights

- Few parents believe their own teens are drinking alcohol (10%) or using marijuana (5%).
- Parents' perceptions fall below teens' own reported use (52% for alcohol; 28% for marijuana).
- Many parents of teens overestimate marijuana and alcohol use by teens nationally.

Parents' Overestimates of Other Teens' Use

Among these same parents of teens, more than half believe the percentage of 10th graders who used marijuana in the past year is 40% or higher. About one-third believe the percentage of 10th graders who drank alcohol in the past year is 60% or higher.

Black and Hispanic respondents were more likely than white and other respondents to overestimate the proportion of teens using marijuana. There were no differences by race/ethnicity in parents' accuracy regarding alcohol.

Implications

Adults' perceptions about teen drug and alcohol use shape their levels of concern about children's health. In this poll, we found that many parents of teens overestimate teens' marijuana and alcohol use at the national level, while very few of these same parents believe that their 13- to 17-year-old kids are using these substances.

Public overestimates of use may reflect a high degree of concern about alcohol and drug use and long-term health problems that can result when substance use begins in the teen years. These results may also indicate that the public is uninformed about patterns of teen substance use—supported strikingly by our finding that parents believe their own teens' use is very low, even while they estimate overall use rates for kids of the same age are very high.

Together, these results underscore the potential value of educational campaigns for the public about teen substance use—reaching out to teens, parents and other adults, to encourage better communication and shared information.

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This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Knowledge Networks, Inc. (KN), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in May 2011 to a randomly selected, stratified group of parents age 18 and older (n=667) with a child age 13-17 from the KN standing panel that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 54% among parent panel members contacted to participate. The margin of sampling error is ± 2 to 5 percentage points.

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