

Drug Trend Data: 2020

The National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) funds the annual Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey. This survey asks students in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades across the country questions about their attitudes and use of alcohol and other drugs.

The results of the survey are tabulated and made available in the same year it was conducted. The most recent results available are from the 2020 survey.

It should be noted the past year (2020) has been quite different than those of years past. And while it has been a challenging year for most people, we know it has been an extraordinarily challenging time for students with school ending abruptly in March of 2020 and lasting through the end of the school year. Even now, some schools remain closed and provide instruction and classes virtually online, while others have cautiously reopened with significant adaptations to their policies and protocols to help address concerns surrounding the pandemic.

As we know, during difficult times, individuals may turn to alcohol and other drugs as a way to cope with feelings of disappointment, anger, sadness, boredom etc. In fact, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show substance use has increased among all age groups, including youth, during the pandemic.

Below is MTF survey data from 2020 regarding more commonly used substances by youth compared to survey data from the previous year - 2019.

ALCOHOL USE:	2019	2020
8th Grade:	19.3	20.5
Past Year		
5 or More Drinks	3.8	4.5
10th Grade:	37.7	40.7
Past Year		
5 or more Drinks	8.5	9.6
12th Grade:	52.1	55.3
Past Year		
5 or More Drinks	14.4	16.8

As we can see from the data above, there was a notable increase in alcohol use at all grade levels. Furthermore, the data shows a related increase in binge drinking. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines binge drinking as 5 or more alcoholic drinks for males and 4 or more alcoholic drinks for females on the same occasion.

It should be noted that prior to 2020, the MTF survey had shown a consistent and measurable decline in use over the past several years. However, as already mentioned, 2020 was not like most years so it is important to understand how a significant disruption, like the pandemic, can impede and negatively impact the progress made in addressing alcohol use and abuse among students.

CIGARETTE/TOBACCO USE:	2019	2020
8th Grade: Past Month	2.2	2.3
10th Grade: Past Month	3.4	3.2
12th Grade: Past Month	5.7	7.5

The data on cigarette use above shows a very minor change in reported use for 8th and 10th graders but shows a more significant increase among 12th graders. This reported trend is particularly noteworthy. It is fair to suggest the pandemic may have a more profound impact on 12th graders who may have, or will, lose out on experiencing and/or celebrating milestones that are often connected to school, such as prom, graduation, and athletic or extracurricular activities. We also need to be mindful that prior to the pandemic, there was an unsettling trend developing among teen nicotine vapers. A study conducted by USC found teens who had not smoked cigarettes prior to vaping, began smoking cigarettes. This is important to note when moving forward to address youth cigarette use.

VAPING NICOTINE:	2019	2020
8th Grade: Past Year	16.5	16.6
10th Grade: Past Year	30.7	30.7
12th Grade: Past Year	35.3	34.5

The data above on nicotine vaping does offer some promise as to how well early preventive measures work. In a year where the trend for substance use showed measurable increases, there were notable decreases among 12th graders and extremely minimal to virtually no increase among 8th and 10th graders.

Many local, state and federal regulations have been put in place, rather quickly, to help curb youth vaping use. These regulations included restricting the sale of vaping products and devices to minors as well as changing the age of purchase from 18 to 21 years of age.

SMOKING MARIJUANA:	2019	2020
8th Grade: Past Year	11.8	11.4
10th Grade: Past Year	28.8	28.0
12th Grade: Past Year	35.7	35.2

The data above shows a small decline in the smoking of marijuana across all three grade levels, which is quite notable in a year where there was an uptick in the use of many substances.

Of course, it should be noted that for the most part, while recreational use has become more widely accepted as “okay”, the overall trend of youth use has been on the decline for the last decade in regards to youth smoking marijuana.

VAPING MARIJUANA:	2019	2020
8th Grade: Past Year	7.0	8.1
10th Grade: Past Year	19.4	19.1
12th Grade: Past Year	20.8	22.1

The above survey data on vaping marijuana presents a different picture than that of smoking marijuana. Two of the three grade levels experienced a visible increase. This is most concerning because marijuana concentrates are generally four times more potent than very high grade smokable marijuana. It should also be noted that over the last several years, substance treatment centers for adults and youth have seen an explosion in those being treated for marijuana dependency.

All in all, the 2020 MTF survey data suggests that the pandemic has played a significant and disruptive role in prevention and early intervention strategies surrounding the use of illicit substances by students. As a result, we must understand the importance of remaining vigilant in addressing the needs of students through early prevention and intervention strategies long after the pandemic ends.

[Stats & Trends in Teen Drug Use with Interactive Chart | NIDA ...](#)
[teens.drugabuse.gov](#) › teachers › stats-trends-teen-drug-...

[Monitoring the Future Study: Trends in Prevalence of Various ...](#)
[www.drugabuse.gov](#) › drug-topics › trends-statistics

[www.cdc.gov](#)

[Drinking Levels Defined | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse an](#)
[www.niaaa.nih.gov](#) › moderate-binge-drinking