

# The CBHSQ Report

Short Report

May 26, 2016

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS AGED 18 TO 22: SUBSTANCE USE FACTS

### AUTHORS

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### INTRODUCTION

College is a time when young people transition to adulthood, with many living independently and making behavioral health decisions without direct parental oversight. In 2014, there were an estimated 12.4 million college students aged 15 to 24 in the United States.<sup>1</sup> As these youth enter adulthood, substance use appears common for many of them. More than one-third of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 engaged in binge drinking in the past month; about 1 in 5 used an illicit drug in the past month.<sup>2</sup> Substance use constitutes one of the most serious public health issues for young people in the United States, creating negative health, social, and economic consequences for adolescents, their families, and communities, and for the nation as a whole.<sup>3,4</sup>

The Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ) within the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) collects, analyzes, and disseminates behavioral health data from sources such as the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), a national data collection that offers insight into substance use and treatment among the civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 12 or older, including young adults in college.<sup>5</sup> This issue of *The CBHSQ Report* uses NSDUH data to present information about substance use among full-time and part-time college students aged 18 to 22.<sup>6</sup>

NSDUH respondents are asked about their past year and past month use of alcohol and illicit drugs, which includes nine categories: marijuana, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, and inhalants, as well as the nonmedical use of prescription-type pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives.<sup>7,8</sup> Marijuana is categorized as an illicit drug because marijuana use remains illegal under federal law in all states (under the Controlled Substances Act: <http://www.fda.gov/regulatoryinformation/legislation/ucm148726.htm>), although the laws regarding marijuana use have changed in a number of states over the past decade.



### In Brief

- This report presents facts about substance use among college students aged 18 to 22 using combined data from the 2011 to 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.
- On an average day during the past year, 2,179 full-time college students drank alcohol for the first time, and 1,326 used an illicit drug for the first time.
- On an average day during the past year, 453 part-time college students drank alcohol for the first time, and 174 used an illicit drug for the first time.
- On an average day during the past year, of the 9.0 million full-time college students in the United States, 1.2 million drank alcohol, and 703,759 used marijuana.
- On an average day during the past year, of the 2.0 million part-time college students in the United States, 239,212 drank alcohol, and 195,020 used marijuana.

All estimates in this report are annual averages based on combined 2011 to 2014 NSDUH data. Because NSDUH data were combined from multiple years, the estimates that are presented in this report represent annual averages. In the combined 2011 to 2014 NSDUH data, there were about 25,400 college students aged 18 to 22 who participated in the survey, of whom 21,000 were full-time students and 4,300 were part-time students.<sup>9</sup> These sample sizes represent an annual average of 9.0 million full-time students and 2.0 million part-time students. This report presents the estimated number of first-time substance users on an average day by college enrollment status.<sup>10</sup> Given that there are more full-time college students than part-time college students, the number of full-time college students engaging in substance use for the first time will be higher than the number of part-time college students engaging in substance use for the first time. This is because presenting the estimated number of users on an average day does not standardize the number of users across varying population sizes and, as a result, it is not useful to compare the number of users who are part-time to the number of users who are full-time. The scale used in the graphics differs for full-time and part-time college students, reflecting the difference in the overall population sizes for both groups.

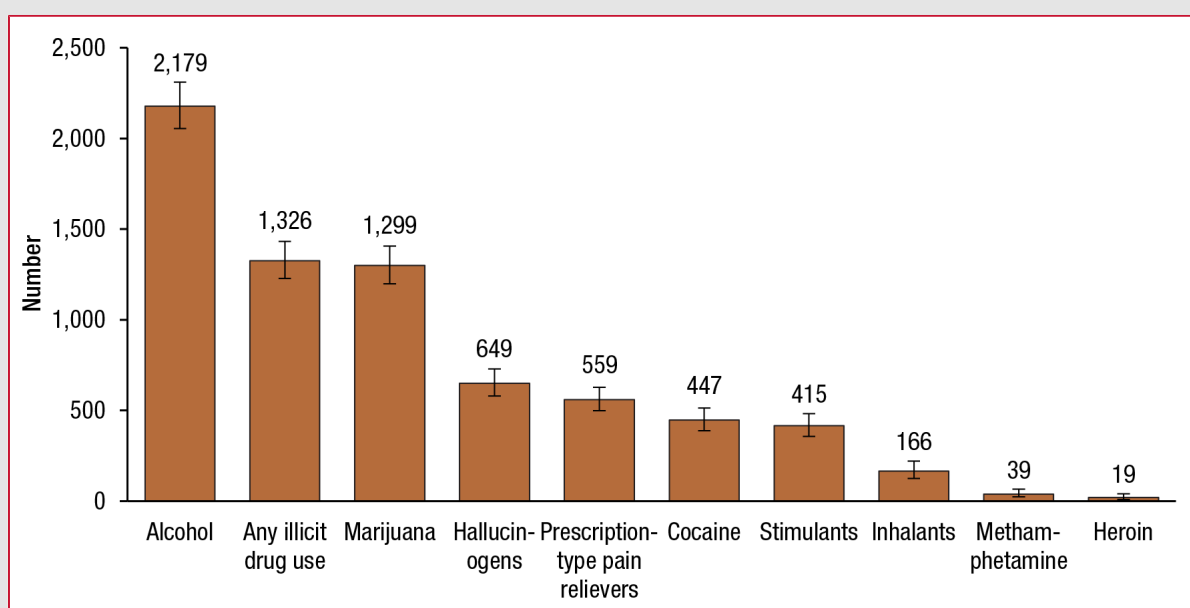
## FIRST-TIME SUBSTANCE USE

### Full-Time College Students

The combined 2011 to 2014 NSDUH data indicate there was an annual average of about 9.0 million full-time college students aged 18 to 22 in the United States. According to NSDUH data, 9.9 percent of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 drank alcohol for the first time in the past year. Of the 9.0 million full-time college students in the United States, 6.0 percent of used illicit drugs for the first time in the past year. On an average day<sup>10</sup> during the past year, full-time college students used the following substances for the first time (Figure 1):

- 2,179 full-time college students drank alcohol;
- 1,326 full-time college students used an illicit drug;
- 1,299 full-time college students used marijuana;
- 649 full-time college students used hallucinogens;
- 559 full-time college students used prescription-type pain relievers nonmedically;
- 447 full-time college students used cocaine;
- 415 full-time college students used licit or illicit stimulants nonmedically;
- 166 full-time college students used inhalants;
- 39 full-time college students used methamphetamine; and
- 19 full-time college students used heroin.

**Figure 1. Number of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 who used alcohol or illicit drugs for the first time on an average day**



Note: Annual averages based on combined 2011 to 2014 data.

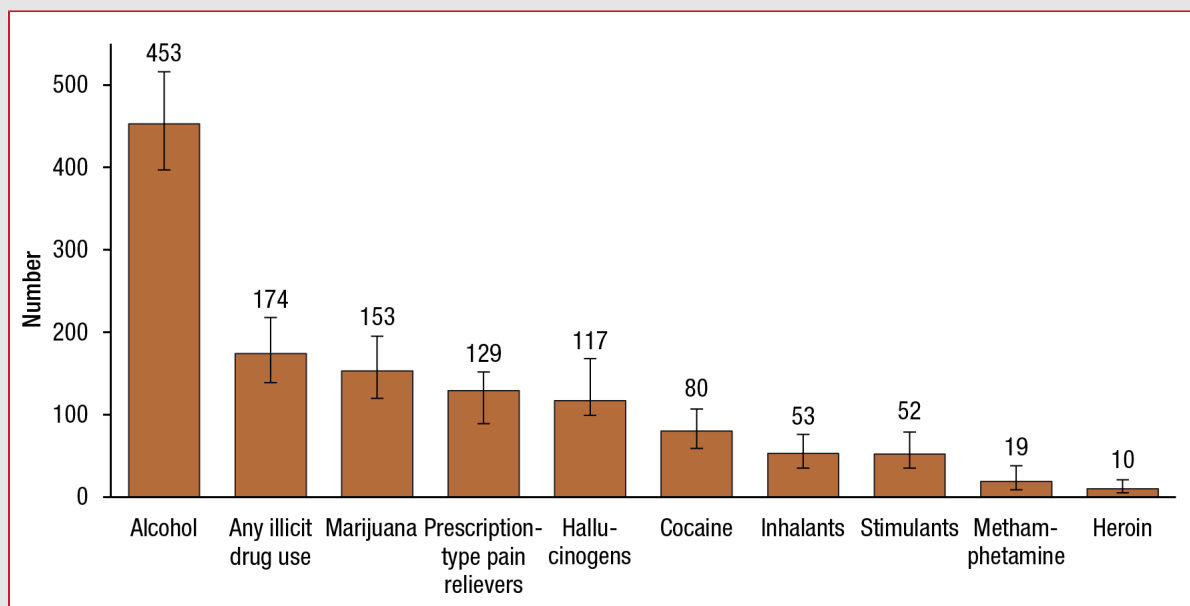
Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2011 and 2014.

## Part-Time College Students

The combined 2011 to 2014 NSDUH data indicate there was an annual average of about 2.0 million part-time college students aged 18 to 22 in the United States. According to NSDUH data, 8.9 percent of part-time college students aged 18 to 22 drank alcohol for the first time in the past year. Of the roughly 2.0 million part-time college students in the United States, 3.8 percent used illicit drugs for the first time in the past year. On an average day<sup>10</sup> during the past year, part-time college students used the following substances for the first time (Figure 2):

- 453 part-time college students drank alcohol;
- 174 part-time college students used an illicit drug;
- 153 part-time college students used marijuana;
- 129 part-time college students used prescription-type pain relievers nonmedically;
- 117 part-time college students used hallucinogens;
- 80 part-time college students used cocaine;
- 53 part-time college students used inhalants;
- 52 part-time college students used licit or illicit stimulants nonmedically;
- 19 part-time college students used methamphetamine; and
- 10 part-time college students used heroin.

**Figure 2. Number of part-time college students aged 18 to 22 who used alcohol or illicit drugs for the first time on an average day**



Note: Annual averages based on combined 2011 to 2014 data.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2011 and 2014.

## ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

### Full-Time College Students

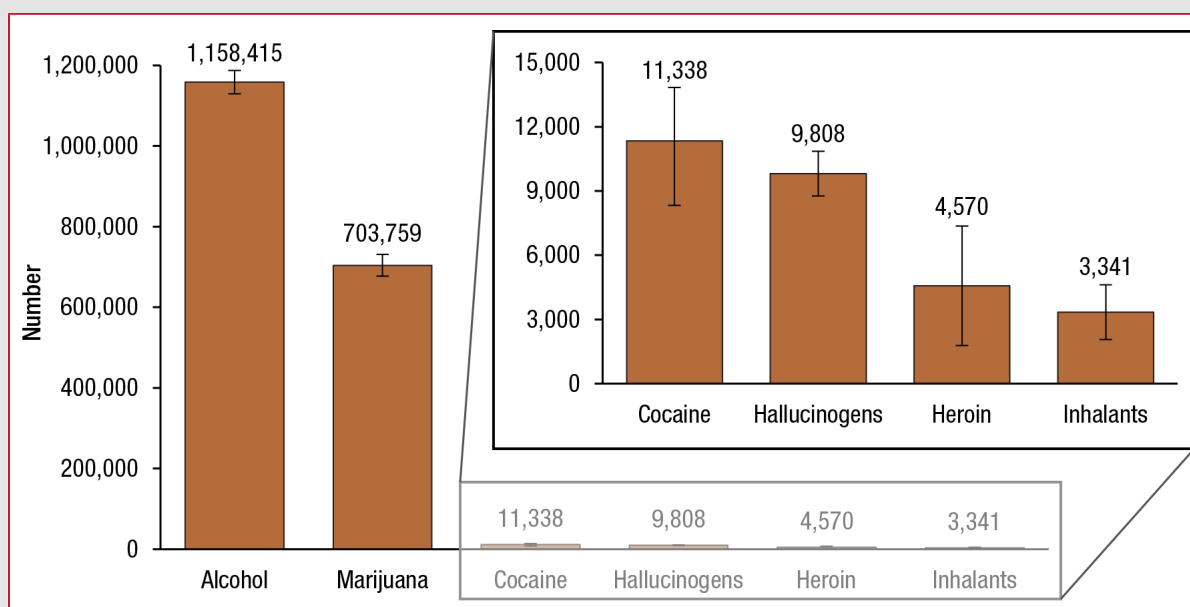
Nearly 5.4 million full-time college students (60.1 percent of this population) drank alcohol in the past month, with 3.5 million engaging in binge drinking and 1.2 million engaging in heavy alcohol use (39.0 and 13.2 percent, respectively). Nearly 2.0 million full-time college students (22.2 percent) used an illicit drug in the past month.

On an average day during the past year, full-time college students used the following substances (Figure 3):

- 1.2 million full-time college students drank alcohol;
- 703,759 full-time college students used marijuana;
- 11,338 full-time college students used cocaine;
- 9,808 full-time college students used hallucinogens;
- 4,570 full-time college students used heroin; and
- 3,341 full-time college students used inhalants.

Full-time college students who used alcohol in the past month drank an average of 4.1 drinks per day on the days on which they drank. Full-time college students who used alcohol in the past month drank on an average of 6.4 days per month.

**Figure 3. Number of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 who used alcohol or illicit drugs on an average day**



Note: Annual averages based on combined 2011 to 2014 data.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2011 and 2014.

### Part-Time College Students

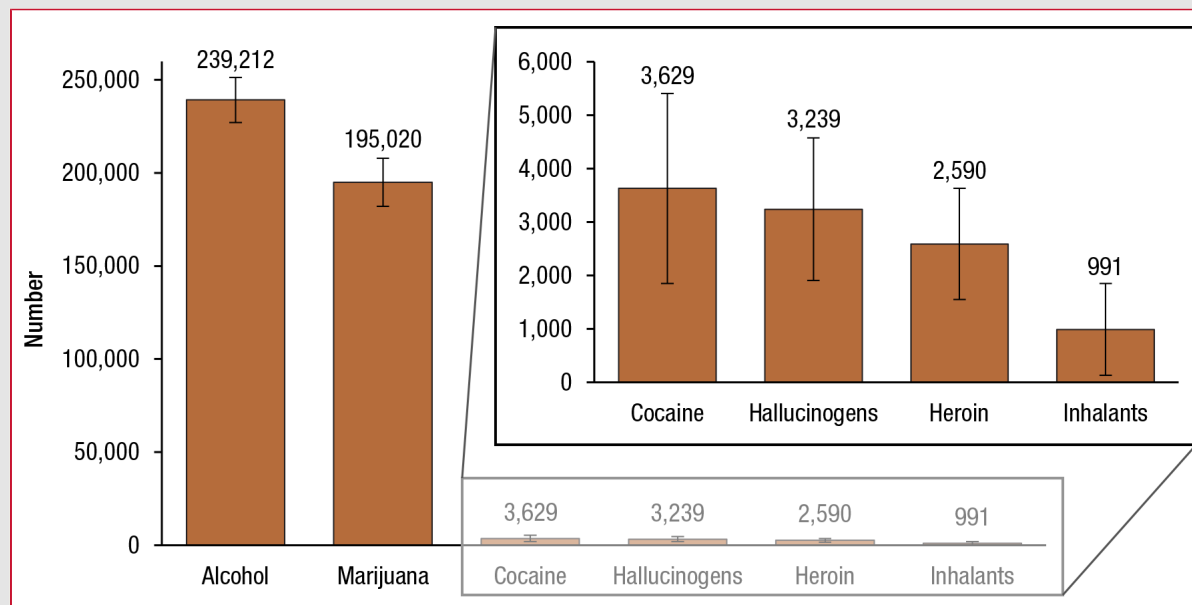
For part-time college students, 1.1 million (56.4 percent of this population) drank alcohol in the past month, with 707,000 engaging in binge drinking and 207,000 engaging in heavy alcohol use (35.5 and 10.4 percent, respectively). Nearly 448,000 part-time college students (22.5 percent) used an illicit drug in the past month.

On an average day during the past year, part-time college students used the following substances (Figure 4):

- 239,212 part-time college students drank alcohol;
- 195,020 part-time college students used marijuana;
- 3,629 part-time college students used cocaine;
- 3,239 part-time college students used hallucinogens;
- 2,590 part-time college students used heroin; and
- 991 part-time college students used inhalants.

Part-time college students who used alcohol in the past month drank an average of 3.8 drinks per day on the days on which they drank. Part-time college students who used alcohol in the past month drank on an average of 6.4 days per month.

**Figure 4. Number of part-time college students aged 18 to 22 who used alcohol or illicit drugs on an average day**



Note: Annual averages based on combined 2011 to 2014 data.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2011 and 2014.

## DISCUSSION

College is often the time when young people begin to engage in substance use. Findings in this report show that, on an average day, alcohol and marijuana were the substances most frequently initiated by both full-time and part-time college students. Heroin and methamphetamine were the least frequently initiated substances by both populations. Because there are more full-time college students than part-time students, it is not useful to compare the number of full-time and part-time college students who are using substances because the differences between the numbers reflect the varying population sizes rather than the proportion of the populations using (i.e., differences in percentages). However, it is possible to compare the information in the report on the average number of drinks consumed by full-time and part-time students. This comparison revealed that the average number of alcoholic drinks consumed by full-time college students slightly exceeded the average number of drinks consumed by part-time college students on days on which they drank alcohol; however, the levels of binge and heavy alcohol use indicate that this is a concern in both populations. Many full-time and part-time college students engaged in binge drinking and in heavy alcohol use.

Although college affords young people numerous new experiences, neither substance use initiation nor substance abuse are universal college experiences. Providing college students with credible and accurate information about the harm associated with substance use is crucial to prevention. To learn about SAMHSA's efforts to promote behavioral health among students and prevent substance use, go to <http://www.samhsa.gov/school-campus-health/>.



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## END NOTES

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1. United States Census Bureau. (2014). Table 5. Type of college and year enrolled for college students 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, attendance status, control of school, and enrollment status: October 2014. In *Current Population Survey October 2014—Detailed tables*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/2014/tables.html>
2. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2015). *Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables*. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2006, January). *A comprehensive plan for preventing and reducing underage drinking*. Retrieved from <http://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov/media/pdf/underagerpttocongress.pdf>.
4. National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2012, November). Medical consequences of drug abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/medical-consequences-drug-abuse>
5. NSDUH is the nation's primary source of information on the prevalence of illicit drug use among the civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 12 or older, and it also provides estimates of alcohol and tobacco use and mental health problems. Begun in 1971 and conducted annually since 1990, NSDUH is sponsored by SAMHSA and collects data from a nationally representative sample of the population aged 12 or older. NSDUH data are collected through face-to-face, computer-assisted interviews at the respondent's place of residence. Items on sensitive topics such as drug use are self-administered to ensure privacy and promote accurate reporting.
6. Respondents were classified as full-time college students if they reported that they were in their first through fourth years (or higher) at a college or university and that they were enrolled full time. Respondents were classified as part-time college students if they reported that they were in their first through fourth years (or higher) at a college or university and that they were not enrolled full time. Respondents who were on break were considered to be enrolled if they intended to return to college or university when the break ended.
7. In NSDUH, a "drink" is defined as a can or bottle of beer, a glass of wine or a wine cooler, a shot of liquor, or a mixed drink with liquor in it. Times when respondents had only a sip or two from a drink are not considered to be alcohol consumption.
8. Nonmedical use is defined as the use of prescription-type drugs not prescribed for the respondent by a physician or used only for the experience or feeling they caused. Nonmedical use of any prescription-type pain reliever, sedative, stimulant, or tranquilizer does not include over-the-counter drugs. Nonmedical use of stimulants includes methamphetamine use.
9. Data on full-time college students aged 18 to 22 in this report vary from data in a recently published report on monthly variation in initiation of substance use among full-time college students aged 18 to 22. The current report uses combined 2011 to 2014 data based on an estimated annual average of 9.0 million full-time college students aged 18 to 22, while the previous report used combined 2002 to 2013 data based on an estimated annual average of 8.6 million full-time college students aged 18 to 22. The variations in the years of data utilized result in generally minor differences in estimates. [www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report\\_2049/ShortReport-2049.pdf](http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_2049/ShortReport-2049.pdf).
10. The number of young adults who used alcohol or illicit drugs "on an average day" is calculated by summing the weighted past month frequency of use (0 to 30 days) for each respective substance and dividing by 30. The number of young adults who used alcohol, cigarettes, or illicit drugs for the first time in the past year "on an average day" is calculated by summing the weighted counts of respondents who both initiated substance use in the past year and were calculated to be between the ages of 18 and 22 at the time of first use and dividing by 365. The average number of cigarettes smoked or alcoholic drinks consumed per day in the past month among past month users is calculated using a weighted average or mean of the number of cigarettes or drinks reported by past month users.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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Lipari, R.N., & Jean-Francois, B. *A Day in the Life of College Students Aged 18 to 22: Substance Use Facts*. The CBHSQ Report: May 26, 2016. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, MD.

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## SUMMARY

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**Background:** College is a period of life when many young adults are exposed to or engage in substance use; however, it is useful to put substance use among college students in to context by examining the number of college students who start using or use substances on an average day. **Method:** Combined 2011 to 2014 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs) data provides estimates of substance use initiation and past month substance use among persons aged 18 to 22 by full-time and part-time college student status. **Results:** Findings in this report show that, on an average day for both full-time and part-time college students, alcohol and marijuana were the substances most frequently initiated and the most frequently used. **Conclusion:** Highlighting the number of college students who are initiating or using substances on an average day may help when addressing substance use on college campuses.

**Keywords:** alcohol, marijuana, prescription drug misuse, methamphetamine, heroin, inhalants, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, NSDUH

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## KEYWORDS

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Education, Short Report, Population Data, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, College Students as Audience, Prevention Professionals, Professional Care Providers, Public Health Professionals, Public Officials, Young Adults as Audience, Alcohol Abuse, Binge Drinking, Nonmedical Use, At-Risk, College Students as Population Group, People with Alcohol Use or Abuse Problems as Population Group, People with Substance Use or Abuse Problems as Population Group, Young Adults as Population Group, Drug Use Trends, Research and Methodology, Alcohol, Cocaine, Ecstasy, Hallucinogens, Heroin, Illegal Drugs, Illicit Stimulants, LSD, Marijuana, Methamphetamine, Pain Relievers, PCP, Prescription Drugs, Tobacco, All US States Only, Sedatives, Initiation

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is an annual survey sponsored by The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The estimates presented in this report are based on combined 2011 to 2014 NSDUH data obtained from about 25,400 college students aged 18 to 22 who participated in the survey, of whom 21,000 were full-time students and 4,300 were part-time students. These sample sizes represent an annual average of 9.0 million full-time students and 2.0 million part-time students. The Survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NSDUH Report is prepared by The Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ), SAMHSA, and by RTI International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. (RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.)

Information on the most recent NSDUH is available in the following publication:

Center for Behavior Health Statistics and Quality. (2013). Results from the 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of national findings (HHS Publication No. SMA 13-4795, NSDUH Series H-46). Rockville, MD : Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available online: <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/population-data-nsduh>.



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Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration  
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