In 2002 and 2003, 11.8 percent of persons 21 years of age or older (23.5 million persons) had never consumed alcohol in their lifetime.

Among nondrinkers, 2.7 percent (644,000 persons) used an illicit drug in the past year; nonmedical use of pain relievers was the illicit drug used most often.

Male and female nondrinkers reported similar past year illicit drug use (2.8 and 2.7, respectively).

Research has shown an association between illicit drug use and alcohol use in both adolescent and adult populations. However, little is known about the characteristics of persons who use illicit drugs but have never used alcohol. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) asks respondents aged 12 or older to report their use of alcohol and illicit drugs in their lifetime as well as in the past year. NSDUH defines "any illicit drug" use as including marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens, heroin, or prescription-type drugs used nonmedically. NSDUH also asks respondents to report any symptoms of substance dependence or abuse. Dependence and abuse are defined by criteria in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), which include such symptoms as...
withdrawal, tolerance, use in dangerous situations, trouble with the law, and interference in major obligations at work, school, or home during the past year. This report uses data from the 2002 and 2003 NSDUH to compare the patterns of illicit drug use among persons who have used alcohol in their lifetime (lifetime alcohol users) with the patterns of illicit drug use among persons who have never used alcohol in their lifetime (lifetime nondrinkers).

**Prevalence of Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use**

In 2002 and 2003, an estimated 88.2 percent of persons aged 21 or older (175.6 million) were lifetime alcohol users, whereas an estimated 11.8 percent (23.5 million) were lifetime nondrinkers. Over half of lifetime alcohol users (52.7 percent) had used one or more illicit drugs at some time in their life, compared to 8.0 percent of lifetime nondrinkers. Among persons who had used an illicit drug in their lifetime, the average age at first illicit drug use was 19 years for lifetime alcohol users, versus 23 years for lifetime nondrinkers.

Lifetime alcohol users aged 21 or older had a significantly higher rate of past year illicit drug use (13.7 percent) compared with lifetime nondrinkers (2.7 percent). In addition, lifetime alcohol users had significantly higher rates of past year use across all illicit drug categories, with the exception of inhalants (Table 1). Nonmedical use of pain relievers was the illicit drug used most often by lifetime nondrinkers, whereas lifetime alcohol users reported using marijuana most frequently.

**Prevalence of Illicit Drug Use by Demographic Characteristics and Lifetime Alcohol Use**

Among lifetime nondrinkers aged 21 or older, the prevalence of past year illicit drug use was similar for males (2.8 percent) and females (2.7 percent). Among lifetime alcohol users aged 21 or older, males had a significantly higher rate of past year illicit drug use than females (16.1 vs. 11.3 percent, respectively). Asians had the highest prevalence of past year illicit drug use among lifetime nondrinkers (4.4 percent), but this difference was not statistically significant compared with other racial/ethnic groups (Figure 1). Among lifetime alcohol users, Asians had a significantly lower rate of past year illicit drug use compared with other racial/ethnic groups.

Lifetime alcohol users aged 21 or older had significantly higher rates of past year illicit drug use across all age categories compared with lifetime nondrinkers (Figure 2). Among lifetime nondrinkers, 4.1 percent of persons aged 21 to 34 used an illicit drug in the past year compared with 26.0 percent of lifetime alcohol users aged 21 to 34.

There was no difference in reported past year illicit drug use
among lifetime nondrinkers aged 21 or older by annual family income (Figure 3). Comparatively, among lifetime alcohol users, persons in lower income families were more likely to report past year illicit drug use than persons in higher income families.

Dependence on or Abuse of Illicit Drugs

In 2002 and 2003, 2.5 percent of all lifetime alcohol users aged 21 or older were dependent on or abused an illicit drug in the past year compared with 0.4 percent of lifetime nondrinkers. An estimated 88,000 persons aged 21 or older were dependent on or had abused illicit drugs in the past year but had never drunk alcohol.

End Notes


Figure and Table Notes

Source: SAMHSA, 2002 and 2003 NSDUH.

* (Figure 1) Estimates for American Indians or Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians or Other Pacific Islanders are not shown due to small sample sizes.