

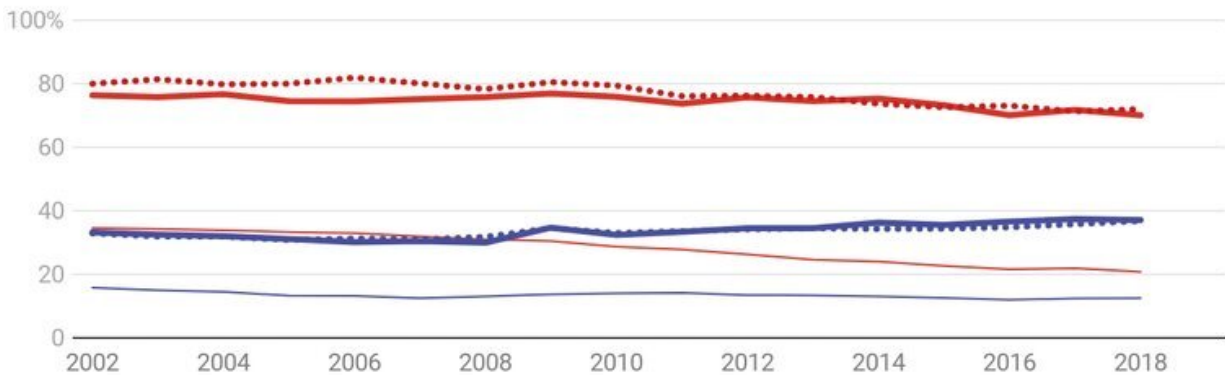
College-age kids are drinking less alcohol – but smoking more marijuana

November 19 2020, by Ty Schepis

Alcohol and marijuana trends among teens and young adults

The number of young adults who used alcohol in the past year fell 8 percentage points from 2002 to 2018 among college students and 6 points among those not in college, while marijuana use rose 5 points for both. Teen alcohol use was down 14 percentage points.

●●● Alcohol use, ages 18-22 in college
 — Alcohol, 18-22 non-college
 — Alcohol, 12-17
●●● Marijuana use, ages 18-22 in college
 — Marijuana, 18-22 non-college
 — Marijuana, 12-17



Data for 18-22 age range from McCabe et al., JAMA Pediatrics; data for 12-17 age range from National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2019.

Credit: [McCabe et al.; National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), [CC BY-ND](#)

Young adults aren't drinking as much as they used to. In fact, more than a quarter don't drink alcohol at all, recent surveys show.

It's good news for health. But there is also a downside in the data: While

[alcohol](#) use is falling among 18-to-22-year-olds, marijuana use is inching upward. The number of [young adults](#) using both alcohol and marijuana is also rising, heightening concerns about a future surge in substance abuse problems, [new research shows](#).

I am a [professor of psychology](#) at Texas State University who has been studying young adult and adolescent substance use for over 15 years. A key interest of mine is how substance use changes over adolescence and young adulthood. It is a period of profound change: A 13-year-old is very different from a 25-year-old in nearly every way.

With colleagues at the University of Michigan, the University of Central Florida and Iowa State University, I have been investigating trends in alcohol and marijuana use in young adults to better understand how use changes with age. The latest numbers offer both hope and concern.

Gen Z is breaking stereotypes

There are reasons for the stereotype of hard-drinking, substance-using young adults, as photos and videos from bars and college parties will attest. But surveys and [our analysis](#) suggest that binge drinking isn't as common as people may believe it is.

Using data from the [annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), we found that in 2018 nearly 30% of college-age adults, ages 18-22, had not had a single alcoholic drink during the previous year, compared with fewer than a quarter in 2002. Over 60% had not used marijuana at all.

Among 18-to-25-year-olds, the number who reported binge drinking in the previous year fell from 39% in 2015 to 34% in 2019. That may be influenced at least in part by beliefs that are forming in high school. Another survey shows that nearly three-quarters of high school seniors think their [friends would disapprove](#) of weekend binge drinking, up

from just over half in the early 1980s.

Adolescents—typically 12 to 17 years of age—were more likely to avoid both alcohol and marijuana than they were two decades ago, part of a larger trend in declining substance use and risky behavior among adolescents seen in a variety of national surveys and data sources. In 2019, nearly 80% of adolescents had not used alcohol at all in the previous year, compared with 65% in 2002, and 87% had not used marijuana.


When drinking and marijuana use lead to harder drugs


The latest federal data on drug use among young adults ages 18-24 shows that using or abusing both alcohol and marijuana is connected with more illegal drug use. The chart shows the percentage of young adults in each category who also use other illicit drugs.


Doesn't use alcohol or marijuana

Uses illicit drugs  3.3%


Uses alcohol or marijuana

Uses alcohol + illicit drugs  7.5%

Uses marijuana + illicit drugs  17.4%

Uses both + illicit drugs  35.4%

Has substance use disorder

Uses alcohol + illicit drugs  47.7%

Uses marijuana + illicit drugs  58.2%


Uses both + illicit drugs  77.7%

Chart: The Conversation/CC-BY-ND • Source: McCabe et al, 2020

Credit: [McCabe et al, 2020](#), [CC BY-ND](#)

Using both marijuana and alcohol

The bad news is that the number of college-age young adults saying they used marijuana at least once in the previous year has increased, from 33% to 37%.

The vast majority who said they used marijuana also used alcohol. We found that the increase in young adults using both [was a result](#) of young adults who used alcohol taking up marijuana, too.

This increase in using both alcohol and marijuana is an important warning sign, because young adults in that group also had much higher rates of other illicit [drug use](#), like cocaine, and prescription drug misuse, involving medications like opioids or benzodiazepines.

That may signal that a greater number will need substance use treatment in the coming years.

Why the changes?

One theory for the shifting trends in alcohol and [marijuana use](#) is that adolescent substance use is now starting at later ages.

The data support this: The numbers of adolescents starting alcohol use has declined somewhat, while more college-age adults are first-time alcohol and marijuana users. Why that shift is occurring is less clear, but one theory is that adolescents have been engaging in more virtual contact than face-to-face contact in recent years and they rarely use substances when they're alone.

Changing regulations likely also play a role. Marijuana is now legal for medical or recreational use in an increasing [number of states](#).

Attitudes toward alcohol and marijuana have also changed over the years, particularly for marijuana.

The [Monitoring the Future](#) study, which has tracked substance use in adolescents and young adults since 1975, indicates both a sharp decline in disapproval of marijuana among middle and [high school](#) students and a decline in how harmful they perceive marijuana to be. In fact, more young people in that age group now see more harm from regular [alcohol use](#) than disapprove of marijuana.

How the pandemic will change young people's habits with alcohol and [marijuana](#) isn't yet clear. One survey conducted this spring when many restaurants and bars were closed found that [adults over 30 were drinking alcohol 14% more often](#). However, when researchers in Australia homed in on younger adults in Gen Z, they found a different story: Older age groups may be drinking more, but with bars and restaurants closed, 44% of the [college-age crowd reported drinking less](#).

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