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National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XVII: Teens

August 2012

Conducted by:
QEV Analytics, Ltd.

Accompanying Statement by Joseph A. Califano, Jr., Founder and Chairman Emeritus

This 17th annual “back-to-school survey” continues the efforts of The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASAColumbia™) to track attitudes of teens and those, like parents, who influence them. For more than a decade and a half this survey has sought to identify characteristics, situations and circumstances that increase or decrease the likelihood of teen substance abuse. Armed with this knowledge, parents, teachers, clergy, coaches and other responsible adults are better able to help our nation’s teens grow up healthy and drug free.

We regard this as a work in progress, as we try each year to improve our ability to identify those factors that influence the risk that a teen will smoke, drink, get drunk, use illegal drugs, or abuse prescription or over-the-counter drugs.

For almost two decades we have been surveying thousands of American teens and parents with the goal of learning how teen attitudes--and the attitudes of their parents--influence teen behavior. Our questions are designed to gain insight into America’s teen culture, with the aim of giving parents a realistic picture of the substance abuse rapids our nation’s teens must negotiate if they are to grow up drug free. We seek to arm parents with the information they need to help their children develop the skills and will to choose not to use.

This year we surveyed 1,003 12- to 17-year olds, 493 boys and 510 girls. We asked questions about their schools, their families, their use of social networking sites like Facebook, their friends’ and classmates’ substance use, and their access to tobacco, alcohol, and illegal and prescription drugs.

What many parents fail to appreciate is that tobacco, alcohol and drug use are pervasive and relentless fixtures in the teen world. Much of this exposure happens at school and with friends, but it also occurs in the home, through

television, and increasingly the Internet, where teens can view pictures of kids their own age partying with alcohol, marijuana and other drugs, and smoking.

Each year in preparing the national survey we hold focus groups of teens to help assure that the questions we ask them are the questions that they hear and to inform us about what's going on in their world. This year teens in our focus groups talked freely about the extent of drinking and drug use among their high school classmates, not only after school, but during the school day, smoking marijuana in the school cafeteria and attending classes while high on alcohol and drugs. So we decided to probe more deeply into what goes on at the schools they attend. Given that school is where teens spend most of their days and make most of their friends, the school environment is an important factor in teens' substance abuse exposure, attitudes and behavior.

What we discovered is profoundly disturbing: For millions of America's teens, drugs and alcohol, not more advanced education, are what put the "high" in the high schools they attend.

America's "High" Schools

For the sixth straight year--and seven out of the last eight years--60 percent or more of teens report that their high schools are drug infected, meaning that drugs are used, kept or sold at the schools. And remember: These are schools to which their parents are by law required to send them.

Worse, in our effort to discover what's going on in our high schools, nearly nine out of 10 high school students told us that classmates are drugging, drinking and smoking during the school day. When we asked how many, high school students estimated that nearly one in five (17 percent) of their classmates are doing this during the school day. More than half of high school students (52 percent) say that there is a place on or near school grounds where students go to use drugs, drink and smoke during the school day. And a third of high school students

(36 percent) say it is easy for students at their school to use drugs, drink alcohol and smoke during the school day without getting caught.

Marijuana, Prescription Drugs, Cocaine, Ecstasy, Other Drugs Sold at School

Not only is high school a place where students can use drugs, many high schools have become supermarkets where students can buy drugs. Almost half of high school students (44 percent) know of a student who sells drugs at their school. Nearly all of them (91 percent) know someone at their school who sells marijuana, a quarter (24 percent) know someone who sells prescription drugs, one in 10 (nine percent) knows someone who sells cocaine and seven percent know someone who sells ecstasy.

Drug Use among High School Classmates

Nearly all high school students (97 percent) say that classmates drink, use drugs or smoke. They say that 47 percent of their classmates drink alcohol, 40 percent of their classmates use drugs and 30 percent smoke.

The disgraceful bottom line: For millions of teens, high school is a convenient place to get high; for millions of parents trying to raise drug-free kids, the "high" school years are the most dangerous time their children face, and the "high" schools (and nearby "high" spots) are a most dangerous place to send their kids. It is unconscionable that states, cities and counties--and their elected governors, mayors and commissioners--that require parents to send their children to school, continue year after year to allow those schools to be drug infected. And it's inexcusable that parents, who raise hell and refuse to send their children to school if there's asbestos in the classroom ceiling, or a serious outbreak of flu, nevertheless send their kids day after day to schools where it is so easy for those kids to buy and use drugs.

Increase in Drug-Infected Private High Schools

In the past decade, the number of drug-infected public schools has increased. For most of that decade parents with the ability to send their kids to private schools believed that they were buying their way out of the drug-infected school problem, but this year's survey reveals a sharp increase in the number of private schools that are drug infected. In 2002, 24 percent of students in private high schools said their school was drug infected. This year--for the first time in the history of this 17 year survey--more than half (54 percent) of private high school students tell us that the school they attend is drug infected. That is an increase of 50 percent in just one year, from 36 percent in 2011 to 54 percent in 2012.

For perspective, consider how the gap is closing: In 2002, 46 percent of students at public high schools said their school was drug infected compared to 24 percent of students at private high schools; in 2012, 61 percent of students at public high schools said their school was drug infected compared to 54 percent of students at private high schools. The 22 percent gap has narrowed to seven percent.

So today we see, vividly for the first time in this survey, the price we are paying for failing to deal with the drug infection that has plagued our public high schools for decades. Now we see that drug abuse and addiction have metastasized into our private schools which are no longer immune safe havens for the parents who can afford to send their children to them.

Social Networking: Digital Peer Pressure

This year's survey revealed a new kind of peer pressure--and a potent one. I call it digital peer pressure. We are all familiar with teen peer pressure--the pressure to be cool, to fit in. That's why parents should care about whom their children's friends are and with whom their children go to school and play. Digital peer pressure moves beyond their children's friends

and kids they hang out with. Digital peer pressure comes into their children's homes and right into their bedrooms via the Internet.

Last year we noticed a correlation between teens who saw pictures of kids getting drunk, passed out or using drugs on social networking sites and their likelier use of alcohol and marijuana. Because it can often take a teen to know a teen, this year we asked teens about this. In this year's survey, 75 percent of teens say that seeing pictures on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace of kids partying with alcohol and marijuana encourages other teens to want to party like that.

And nearly half of teens (45 percent) surveyed have seen pictures of kids getting drunk, passed out, or using drugs on Facebook or other social networking sites. This includes 18 percent of 12- and 13-year olds, 50 percent of 14- and 15-year olds, and 68 percent of 16- and 17-year olds.

Compared to teens who have never seen pictures on Facebook or another social networking site of kids getting drunk, passed out, or using drugs, teens who have seen such pictures are:

- Four times likelier to have used marijuana (25 percent vs. 6 percent);
- More than three times likelier to have used alcohol (43 percent vs. 13 percent); and
- Almost three times likelier to have used tobacco (16 percent vs. 6 percent).

The take home message for parents is clear: Try to learn what your children are viewing on social networking sites. If your children are seeing pictures of teens partying with drugs and alcohol--getting drunk or passed out--or using drugs, they may think it looks like fun and want to try it.

Home Alone

For the first time this year we asked teens if they are ever left home alone overnight without adult supervision. Nearly one-third of teens (29 percent) say they have been left home alone overnight, including 17 percent of 12- and 13-year olds, 27 percent of 14- and 15-year olds, and 42 percent of 16- and 17-year olds.

Compared to teens who are never home alone overnight without adult supervision, those who are left home alone overnight without adult supervision are:

- Twice as likely to have used marijuana (23 percent vs. 11 percent);
- Nearly twice as likely to have used alcohol (41 percent vs. 21 percent); and
- Nearly three times likelier to have used tobacco (20 percent vs. 7 percent).

Parental Disapproval

As we've found in the past, this year's data again confirms that parental expectations, particularly expressing strong disapproval of substance abuse, can be a decisive factor in their teens' behavior. Teens who say their parents would be extremely upset to find out their child smokes, drinks or uses marijuana are less likely to use these substances or to say that it's okay for teens their age to smoke, get drunk and use marijuana. Compared to such teens, those who say their parents would not be extremely upset if they parents found out their child smokes, drinks or uses marijuana are:

- Eight and a half times likelier to say it's okay for teens their age to use marijuana (34 percent vs. 4 percent);
- Ten times likelier to say it's okay for teens their age to get drunk (22 percent vs. 2 percent); and

- Nine times likelier to say it's okay for teens their age to smoke cigarettes (18 percent vs. 2 percent).

Conclusion

We believe that, armed with information about the world their teens are living in, parents can be a powerful, and indeed decisive, influence on the behavior of their children. We have often said that the most important finding of twenty years of intensive research is this: A child who gets through age 21 without smoking, abusing alcohol, or using drugs is virtually certain never to do so. That's why we have put so much emphasis on parents and families, and this year on high schools. This year's survey and report add to the substantial compilation of risk and protective factors that CASAColumbia has identified over the past 20 years. Much of that information is contained in the book, *How to Raise a Drug-Free Kid: The Straight Dope for Parents*, which highlights these factors and the influence that parents can have while providing specific parenting suggestions and tips. While I wrote that book, it is based on the years of CASAColumbia research.

A Word of Appreciation

I want to express CASAColumbia's appreciation to Steve Wagner, President of QEV Analytics, Ltd., for administering the survey and for his insightful work in developing the questions and analyzing all the data as he has done for many years.

We much appreciate the invaluable counsel of our survey advisory group: Timothy Johnson, PhD, Director of the Survey Research Laboratory, University of Illinois, Chicago, Professor of Public Administration, School of Public Health, University of Illinois, Chicago; and Robert Shapiro, PhD, Professor, Department of Political Science, Columbia University.

On CASAColumbia's staff, Emily Feinstein, Senior Policy Analyst, did a first rate job in managing this effort, worked with Steve Wagner in analyzing all the survey data, and wrote the

report, which I edited. Sarah Tsai of CASAColumbia's Substance Abuse and Data Analysis Center (SADACSM) assisted with the data analysis. As she has so often, Jane Carlson efficiently handled the formatting and administrative aspects of the report production.

All these individuals helped, but CASAColumbia and QEV Analytics, Ltd. are responsible for this report.