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Changes in Cigarette and Illicit Drug Use Among US Teenagers

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Tobacco has been the most typical first drug used by youth in the United States, and rates of its use generally have been much higher than rates of illicit substances among youth. While tobacco use remains a major public health problem, dramatic strides have been made in the past 10 years in reducing the prevalence of use, particularly among teenagers

Methods

All data are from the Monitoring the Future Study, an annual survey conducted by the University of Michigan, assessing a nationally representative sample of approximately 46 000 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students. Rates of past month's cigarette use in each year of the study were compared with past month's illicit drug use for each grade level.

Results

As seen in the Figure, students in all 3 grades in this population have shown substantial reductions in cigarette smoking since 1997, so that in 2008, the rates of smoking among teenagers were the lowest observed since the initiation of the survey (1975 for 12th graders and 1991 for 8th and 10th graders).¹ By contrast, rates of illicit drug abuse have dropped much less rapidly. It is noteworthy that during the 1990s, use of cigarettes was significantly more prevalent than use of illicit drugs, at times twice as prevalent. More recently, rates of illicit drug use began to exceed the rate of cigarette smoking,² this crossover occurring in 2001 for 10th grade, 2007 for the 12th, and 2008 for eighth grade. This finding of a rapid and substantial drop in cigarette smoking among teenagers compared with a lesser drop in illicit drug use is consistent with the other 2 large national surveys on youth behavior and drug use in the United States: the National Survey on Drug Use and Health Study (funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Study (funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).^{3,4}

Comment

The decrease in youth cigarette smoking in the United States is a major accomplishment for the health community; however, we should not overlook the relatively alarming levels of illicit drug use in the same population. In 2008, more than 1 in 5 high school seniors reported current illicit drug use. Given the wide range of long-term consequences associated with drug use during youth (such as criminal justice involvement, infectious diseases, and other problems with physical and mental health),⁵ efforts should be expanded to prevent and reduce drug use in this population. The Monitoring the Future Study results show that drug

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use is as normative as cigarette smoking in youth, so it is time for the health community to think creatively as to how to generate declines in illicit drug use similar to what we have seen in youth cigarette smoking.

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Figure.

Cigarette and illicit drug use in the past month among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the US Monitoring the Future Study. The circles and arrows highlight crossovers, where illicit drug use exceeded cigarette use.