
Teenage Drug Abuse In The United States

Teenagers in today's society are plagued with many school, family, and social troubles, all while still their young minds are still developing. To a teenager trying to fit in or find their place, the biggest of their problems are often social. One of these social problems that teens have to deal with is the presence of drugs. While kids are taught that drugs are bad and detrimental to one's health, 33.3% of high school seniors in non-medical marijuana states reported using marijuana in 2016. Whether it's due to peer pressure, societal influences, or curiosity, drug use in teens is one of the most prevalent issues still impacting communities across the nation. Drug habits and addictions are damaging to one's health, cost a lot of money, and hurt the relationships in one's life, while generally lowering one's quality of life. While schools are aware of the problem in teens, they cannot seem to do enough to help the situation. The main reasons why drug use is still a horrible issue in teens is due to the lack of, or ineffectiveness of drug education, and the absence of significant influence on teenagers to not use drugs.

For teenagers, drugs use is detrimental to their health due to the fact that their bodies and minds are still developing. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 45% of high school students abused alcohol in 2016, and 33.3% abused marijuana. For teens, the most abused drug is alcohol. While legal for adults, alcohol impacts teens more severely than adults in many different ways. For example, drinking during teenage years known as a "critical growth period" has been shown to lead to, "lifelong damage in brain function, particularly as it relates to memory, motor skills (ability to move), and coordination". For other substances besides alcohol, Lubman and Yucal write that use in teens "may increase risk for mental disorder by disrupting neural development in regions critically involved with cognitive and affective function". By analyzing these articles, it becomes clear that substance abuse in teens does long term damage to their fragile, developing brains. By not cutting down the amount of teen drug users, the future of society will be comprised of adults with lower rates of brain functionality. If that isn't bad enough, kids that drink before age fifteen are four times as likely to have alcohol dependence issues.

Drug abuse is shown to have a negative effect on many different aspects of life. In terms of crime, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), "Alcohol and drugs are implicated in an estimated 80% of offenses leading to incarceration in the United States". To add on to this, 80% of offenders abuse drugs or alcohol, and nearly 50% of jail and prison inmates are clinically addicted. A trend clearly exists between those who abuse substances and commit crimes, for a couple of reasons. For one, most drugs are illegal, and even possession can lead to arrest. Second, drugs and alcohol impair judgement, leading to decisions that one would normally not make while sober. Lastly, one with a drug dependency is

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more likely to be arrested for robbery or theft, to support their drug habit. It is important to keep drugs away from teens so that they have less of a reason to be criminals, and are less likely to commit crimes. If teens know drugs are illegal and harmful, why do they still choose to abuse drugs?

A key factor as to why teens abuse drugs is their lack of, or their plain disregardment of, drug education. In 2016, only 31.1% of high school seniors reported regular marijuana use as harmful. The common perception of regular usage of marijuana as non-harmful shows the ineffectiveness of the current policies regarding drug education. One of the main drug resistance programs intended for teens is Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE). DARE led a campaign known as the “Just Say No” campaign, and was started in high schools and middle schools during the 1970’s to scare teens away from drugs. The goal of the program was to teach kids creative ways to say no to drugs, while boosting kids’ self-esteem, two things that DARE insisted would lower drug use among teens. The New York Times did a study on those who did participate in DARE and those who did not, and found no significant difference in substance abuse between the two groups.

The abstinence programs taught in schools do not properly educate or prepare teens for reality. The problem being that most schools choose to teach teenage drug prevention through abstinence programs rather than harm minimization. By teaching abstinence programs, teens would see contradictory situations in everyday life. Teens are taught to remain abstinent and not touch substances, but when a parent or peer is having a drink or smoking a cigar, and is still doing well in every aspect of life, the teen wonders, “Why can’t I?” These contradictions to their education prompt curiosity that is inherent in every teen. The result is a potentially harmful situation where substances are abused in teenage years, eventually leading to addiction. Even though schools were teaching the idea that drugs will ruin your life, this did nothing to deter teen drug usage.

Teenagers have many different reasons for using drugs. The most common reasons for drug abuse in teens is to rebel, to feel good, to experiment, to avoid the feelings of pain, and the biggest one, to fit in.. The influences placed on drug use by peers in a social environment is more often to use rather than to not use. The result is the “prevalence of use among age peers as a validation”, a validation of social status and being “cool”. As being cool as a teen sometimes involves rebelling against parents and authority, the tendency to rebel and use drugs go hand in hand. This can turn into a slippery slope for teenagers. Those who once used substances around peers to earn their approval, quickly find themselves using substances alone to feel better, or to feel normal again. This peer pressure leads to more addicts and more drug abuse, but peers are not the only thing influencing teens.

Teens are influenced by different elements in American culture, including the drug culture

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captured by the media. The idea of a drug free youth predominantly fails due to the fact that America is not a drug free society. The culture of America has become one where drugs are incorporated in mass media, leaving teens with less drug-free adults to act as role models. In popular culture, rappers and musicians are heard and seen on computers, phones, radios, and televisions across the culture. Much of the music that teenagers are listening to include references to all kinds of drugs and risky behaviors. As teenagers, the media being displayed to them has an influence on their actions, and with so many songs and artists glorifying drug usage, teens are more likely to believe that drug usage is popular or “cool”. As famous artists and musicians serve as role models to teens, teens are more likely to engage in drug usage as an effort to emulate their beloved role models.

In order to promote a drug free life for teens, it is necessary to invest in proper drug education that will help to display all the negative aspects of drug use to children. Rather than focusing on unrealistic expectations such as leaving an area where drugs are present or always saying no, drug education should focus on the negative aspects that come with saying yes. Educational programs should show the life of crime that addicts fall into, the lack of money users have due to always having to buy drugs, and the harm that doing drugs really does to your body. An organization that helps to educate teens on all the negative aspects on becoming addicted is the Foundation for a Drug Free World. Rather than employing the “Just Say No” approach of DARE, the Foundation for a Drug Free World uses a more reformed approach to education. Realizing that a kid never encountering drugs in today’s world is a very unrealistic situation, the Foundation for a Drug Free World focuses on harm reduction while promoting moderation to those who choose to try drugs. Rather than alienating users and dividing teens into those who use and those who don’t, the Foundation for a Drug Free World argues that it is never too late to seek help and explains that while there could be no current problems in a teen’s life due to drugs, if the teen continues to stay on their path, negative consequences are sure to come. By devoting time towards proper drug education and using a more reformed system of drug education, America’s youth will finally start to get the help it needs.

Drug usage is one of the worst problems plaguing the nation’s teenage population. Drug use beginning in adolescence hurts the teenager’s self-esteem, impacts long term cognition, damages the brain, increases the likeliness of crime, and degrades overall quality of life. Without proper, effective drug education, and a stronger influence on responsible use patterns to counter influences to abuse drugs, the teen population continues to be at risk of the negative effects of drug abuse.

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