

# Chapter 1

## Rates and Patterns of Drug Use: The Basics

There are four concepts crucial to understanding rates and patterns of drug use:

### 1. Overall Prevalence Rates

Prevalence rate = the percentage of a given population that has used a specific drug within a specific time period

- Many commentators discuss illicit drugs as if the use of each and every one were precisely equivalent, whereas the number of users that different drugs attract actually varies considerably
- Prevalence rates could be measured by lifetime, past year, or past month use
- Alcohol (a *legal* drug) is the most popular of all psychoactive substances
- Of all illicit drugs, marijuana is the one used by the greatest number of people – and by a considerable margin
- Some drugs, like heroin and crack cocaine, are used by relatively few people but have huge repercussions in terms of criminal activity

### 2. Continuance (or "loyalty") Rates

Continuance Rate = A proportion of one-time drug users to current drug users.

- The number of people who have ever used a given drug is less important than the number and proportion who use it regularly
- Continuance rate is one of the most important features of a drug's pattern of use
- Drugs vary with respect to user loyalty
- For legal drugs, alcohol generates the strongest or greatest user loyalty
- Of illegal drugs, marijuana generates the strongest user loyalty
- As a general rule, legal drugs have higher continuance rates than illegal drugs. Why?
- The more deviant or illicit the drug, the more that users discontinue its use, or use it sporadically; the more conventional or licit the drug, the more that users continue its use and take it regularly.

### 3. Consumption Levels

Consumption levels = the total volume of a given drug that is used during a given time period

- A given drug may be widely used (prevalence rate) but not necessarily heavily used (consumption level)
- Legalization is more likely to influence consumption levels than prevalence rates
- Far more people drink alcohol than smoke tobacco cigarettes
- Cocaine has significantly higher prevalence rates than heroin

### 4. Life-Cycle Rates

Life-Cycle rates = varying likelihoods of using drugs at different ages in the life span.

- In spite of slight variations, for at least three decades, drug use has been, and remains:

- relatively low among youth (12 to 17),
- extremely high among young adults (18 to 25),
- even lower in the older adult years (26 to 34),
- and lower still after the age of 35.

### **Trends Over Time: An Introduction**

- One of the most interesting issues a sociologist or criminologist addresses is trends in drug use over time
- To identify and analyze trends, we need valid, reliable, and systematic data.
- Systematic data = data that were gathered in a planned fashion and represent an accurate, cross-sectional view of the phenomenon under study

### **Alcohol Consumption, 1700s to 1919**

- A main way to measure alcohol consumption is by calculating the volume of alcohol (which varies per drink) purchased.
- Drinking was much more common in all parts of society in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century America than it is today.
- 1830 was the high point in the nation's alcohol consumption, after which drinking declined.
- The seeds of temperance were planted nearly a half-century before with the publication of Benjamin Rush's 1784 treatise, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits on the Human Mind and Body*. He was the first to refer to alcoholism as a disease/addiction.
- By 1830, more than 200 local antiliquor chapters were formed under the temperance movement
- With minor fluctuations, rates of drinking remained fairly stable between 1850 and the dawn of Prohibition at just over 2 gallons per person ages 15 and older per year.
- Between 1916 and 1919, alcohol consumption declined significantly, to below 2 gallons.

### **Alcohol Consumption During Prohibition**

- Volstead Act = the Eighteenth Amendment, which outlawed the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages in the United States (1920-1933)
- Alcohol consumption greatly declined during the first years of prohibition.
- Rates recovered to about 60-70% of pre-prohibition levels during the later years of prohibition.
- Right after prohibition, these levels remained the same. They returned to pre-prohibition levels in the following decades (Miron & Zwiebel 1991).

### **Repeal: Alcohol Consumption, 1933 to the Twenty-first Century**

- The use of alcohol rose throughout the 1930s and early 40s, jumped during the World War II years, and leveled off until the late 60s, when it to began to rise.

- During the late 1960s, illicit drug use increased as well, suggesting that the uses of legal and illegal psychoactive substances are related.
- Alcohol consumption reached a post-Prohibition peak somewhere between the late 1970s and early 80s, and declined throughout the 80s and 90s.
- Consumption rose during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but leveled off by 2010.
- The historical co-relationships between alcohol use and crime, and alcohol and illicit drug use, are well documented.

#### **Drug Use Trends Over Time: 1960s to 1979**

- The 1970s represented a kind of high point of tolerance toward use
- This growing tolerant attitude was translated into legal policy during the 1970s
- During that decade 12 states decriminalized the possession of small quantities of marijuana
- Legislators sensed more public acceptance of at least one illicit drug and implemented that perception into legal policy, voting to remove criminal penalties for small quantity possessions

#### **Drug Use: The 1980s to the Twenty-First Century**

- Two remarkable events during the 80s and 90s:
  - In the decade or so after drug use's high point (1978-1980), it experienced a sharp decline
  - During the early 1990s, drug use seemed to be on the rise again
- The biggest increases in drug use after the early 1990s took place among the very young - segments of the population whose use began to be recorded for the first time in that year.
- Initiation into the use of illicit substance was beginning to take place at earlier and earlier ages.
- In the brief span of just five years between the early to the mid-1990s, recent or current illicit drug use had more than *doubled* among an extremely vulnerable adolescent segment of the population.
- Clearly, after the early 1990s, a disturbing trend in drug use among the young was in the works, and no one knew what to do about it.

#### **Summary**

- Prevalence rates show that legal drugs are much more popular than illegal. However, even the smaller number of users of illegal drugs can result in a great deal of crime and cost society an enormous amount of money in social services.
- Continuance rates show that drinkers are more loyal to alcohol than users are to any specific drug.
- Alcohol consumption was very high in colonial, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> century America. It declined after 1830 as a result of the temperance movement, and even further during Prohibition. It rose slowly after Prohibition until a high in 1978. Drug use rose during the 90s, possibly because of more tolerant attitudes and possibly because of the