

Girls using drugs, alcohol more than boys

Young women are more vulnerable to consequences, researcher says

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NEW YORK — In a reversal of past trends, teenage girls are trying marijuana, alcohol and cigarettes at higher rates than boys, the White House drug czar said Thursday.

The findings from a new government analysis come even as teen drug use is declining overall.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health, released by John Walters, the national drug policy director, indicates 1.5 million girls ages 12 to 17 started drinking alcohol in 2004, the most recent year for which data is available. That compares with 1.28 million boys.

Among the same age group, 730,000 girls started smoking cigarettes in 2004, compared with 565,000 boys, and 675,000 girls starting using marijuana, compared with 577,000 boys, the survey found.

The nationwide survey, based on interviews with 70,000 families, also found that girls surpassed boys in abusing prescription drugs. Of the youths surveyed in 2004, 14.4 percent of girls and 12.5 percent of boys reported misusing prescription drugs.

“This is the first time that we’ve recorded this kind of relationship between boys’ and girls’ drug use,” said Walters. “In the past, boys have had higher rates of use — and significantly higher rates of use at certain times in the past.”

Overall illicit drug use among youths 12 to 17 has declined 19 percent since 2001, according to the survey.

“In order to drive it down further, we have to deal with today’s substance abuse reality, and today’s reality is, girls have been using at higher rates than boys in critical areas,” Walters said.

Experts who joined Walters at a news conference in a Manhattan hotel said girls’ use of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes is particularly alarming because girls are more vulnerable to their effects.

“Boys and girls react to drugs differently,” said Dr. Warren Seigel, past president of the New York State chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Seigel said research has shown that girls may become addicted to nicotine faster than boys and even moderate drinking can disrupt their growth and the development of their reproductive systems.

“It’s imperative that parents understand that these differences exist, and understand the differences between girls and boys, because it requires some different parenting skills,” he said.

Dr. Ralph Lopez, an associate professor at Cornell University’s Weill Medical College and the author of “The Teen Health Book: A Parents’ Guide to Adolescent Health and Well-Being,” said teenage girls are at risk for drug and alcohol use because they feel pressure to succeed academically and also to look perfect.

“They have to be skinny and gorgeous,” he said. “We don’t do that to the boys.”

Lopez said many parents are afraid to confront their children about drugs.

“I’m afraid that our parents have dropped the ball in many cases,” he said. “I have a line in my practice that if you are popular with your kids, you’re doing something wrong.”