



THE BLOG

02/13/2006 07:42 pm ET Updated May 25, 2011

Media Botches Drug Trends

By Maia Szalavitz

Girls Not More Likely to Become Addicts than Boys, Everyone who Tries Drugs Once is Not a “User,” And Causation is Still Not Correlation

The drug czar’s Office of National Drug Control Policy and Columbia’s National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse delivered a double whammy last week with simultaneous press releases that prompted hundreds of breathless headlines about girls beating boys in the all-star game of drug abuse.

This is yet another example of how these various organizations terrorize parents — often leading to potentially harmful and unnecessary residential treatment (my promised post on how to choose residential treatment will appear later this week — but this is an especially good and timely example of how the media and these groups collude to scare parents).

From the New York Daily News’ headline “More teen girls than boys into sex and drugs,” to Ohio’s Canton Repository, which claimed “Girls Smoking, Drinking at Higher Rates than Boys,” to the Los Angeles Times, “Girls Try Drugs, Alcohol at Higher Rates,” readers and viewers could have been forgiven for thinking that rehabs were about to morph into sorority houses. “The trends of substance use among our adolescent girls are alarming,” said drug czar John Walters.

As the Washington Post [reported it](#),

“Teenage girls, having already caught up to their male counterparts in illegal drug use and alcohol consumption, now have the dubious distinction of surpassing boys in smoking and prescription drug abuse. In the past two years, in fact, more young women than men started using marijuana, alcohol and cigarettes, according to government findings being released today.”

But my colleagues and I at [stats.org](https://www.stats.org) (special thanks to research director Rebecca Goldin) took a look at the same data and found a totally different story - one that should provide a measure of hope, if not necessarily comfort, to parents around the country: Both boys and girls are taking *fewer* drugs than last year and the year before. Smoking and illicit drug use is down, while alcohol abuse remains constant. Boys are much more likely than girls to smoke pot or cigarettes on an ongoing basis and to take illegal drugs frequently.

The notion that there are higher numbers of “new users” amongst females is also misleading. Most people would define a “drug user” as someone who takes drugs regularly: but the media, the drug czar’s office and CASA defined a drug “user” as someone who may have only taken a drug once.” Under this definition, our current President is a drinker and former President Clinton counts as a marijuana smoker.

By this “measure,” there are more girls “using” drugs — however, the salient point is that they are far less likely than boys to use drugs more than once or twice. As the latest Monitoring the Future monograph, (the other large government-funded study of long-term drug trends) put it, “On average, female users take fewer types of drugs and tend to use them less frequently than their male counterparts.”

For example, women continue to lag behind men (and girls behind boys) in daily use of marijuana, alcohol, and cigarettes. They lag behind men in monthly use of marijuana and alcohol. However, girls are more likely to have *tried* pot at a young age. We applaud a follow-up piece in which this point was made.

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We also found a wealth of evidence in the NSDUH data that supported the view that boys are still at greater risk for harmful drug effects than girls. In particular,

- ***Boys have the biggest problems with drugs, at all ages and across the entire spectrum of drugs. Boys are more likely to become addicted to drugs, more likely to take illicit drugs regularly, more likely to smoke as young adults, and more likely to drink.***

- *Girls? They beat out the boys in some narrow categories, such as binge drinking (defined as having more than 5 drinks at once) in eighth grade, early prescription drug abuse, and smoking under age 18. But as girls get older, their use peters out relatively quickly, while the boys more than make up for their later start.*
- **Girls do smoke less pot than boys.** *For teens age 12-17, the rate of girls who are “current users” (defined as having smoked pot in the last month), has held steady, while it has gone down for boys. However, girls still do it a lower rate than boys - a little over seven percent of girls have smoked pot in the past month, and a little over eight percent of boys have (down from about nine percent in 2002).*
- **Males smoke more than females.** *In the age group 12-17, girls smoke more cigarettes than boys (12.5 percent, compared to 11.3 percent of boys), but among all people over 12 years old, about 22 percent of females smoke, compared to almost 28 percent of males. Perhaps more importantly, smoking is declining for both boys and girls - though it is declining faster for boys.*
- **Drug use in both girls and boys is going down, not up.** *Of all the drug and alcohol abuse we examined, only underage drinking has remained constant over the past two years.*

Other pseudo-science in the coverage was also alarming. So-called “experts” were quoted implying connections that the data do not support. Some claimed that “today’s young women live in an increasingly stressful environment”. But if it’s more stressful than before and if stress increases drug abuse, why are the rates going *down*?

Also, reporters noted that drugs go “hand-in-hand” with risky sexual behavior and depression, according to the research. But journalists should be wary of implying that drugs are somehow compromising girls’ mental health. Many addiction researchers believe it’s the other way around - depressed girls (and those with a predisposition to take risks in sexual and other behaviors) are more likely to do drugs.

It’s hard to understand why journalists don’t even appear to have read the survey data they cover here, seeming to rely only on the ONDCP’s 11 page “analysis” of the NHSDUH titled “Girls and Drugs,” [pdf] and on a press release from CASA. Had they looked at the numbers themselves, they would have found that even the hype about increased prescription drug use among girls compared to boys is overblown.

When it comes to trying drugs once or twice, girls appear to do so earlier at higher rates than boys — but this pattern can be seen as far back as the late 70's, across drug classes, with girls tending to lead boys in drugs that can be used for weight loss [pdf]. For example, 16.5% of female high school seniors reported amphetamine use at least once in 1975, while only 15.6% of their male classmates did. In 1996, 3.1% of 8th grade girls reported cocaine use that year; only 2.9% of 8th grade boys said they'd taken cocaine then.

However, when it comes to current use of the prescription drugs that have generated so many headlines in the last few years — painkillers — just 1.8% of girls 12-17 report use in the last month, while 2.6% of boys do. In general, more boys than girls have used any prescription drug in the last month, with 3.2% of boys reporting such use, compared to 2.4% of girls.

CASA has a long record of playing fast and loose with statistics. It once claimed that 25% of all alcohol is consumed by underage drinkers and then, when confronted with the actual government figure of 11.4%, said that the real figure is probably 30%. (For more debunking of myths on alcohol and teens, click here.)

And CASA has long pushed the idea that addiction has become an epidemic among girls. So it's hardly surprising to see the organization taking advantage of anything that helps keep this idea spinning around the media, especially when it has just published a new book on women and addiction.

The ONDCP has pushed some dubious ideas on the public too, by stretching science and statistics (notably, with its recent campaign to persuade people that smoking pot can put you at risk for severe mental illness).

Fool us once, shame on you — but fool us repeatedly? No wonder people are dubious about the mainstream media's credibility.

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