

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1

Americans face up to drug problem - at home, on job, in school

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Abstract *

In just two decades the abuse of drugs has gone from largely an isolated ghetto phenomenon and a few experimental "trips" by counterculture fringe groups to a major social problem, involving doctors, housewives, and lawmakers. A chief culprit is the cannabis sativa, a spindly plant with narrow leaves.

Full Text

One would never guess that just six months ago Audrey was a heroin-addicted prostitute. A petite woman with finely chiseled features, Audrey is the daughter of a father with a criminal record and a mother addicted to alcohol. Consequently, her immersion into the abuse of drugs occurred early.

Today Audrey lives in a drug-free Florida treatment facility. Standing in the sun drying her newly varnished nails, she talks about starting a new life. "I decided I had to finally break this habit, when I looked at my kids. I just didn't want to see my little girl turn out the same way, and I knew if I didn't break this awful pattern my family was in, no one else would." Her goals: to become a social worker and make a drug-free home for her children

When friends used to pass Paul a beer, he would accept. Too often. But today he and group of friends at a suburban San Jose, Calif., school are bucking peer pressure. They have launched a program called CHOICE. The aim: to provide alternatives to drinking and drug-taking. "I know we're not going to convince kids not to drink with facts and figures. . .," says the senior. "But there's an awful lot of kids out there who are relieved to know we've decided not to take any.'

On a balmy spring day in Washington, Nancy Reagan mingles with pinstriped members of corporate America in the White House foyer. As hostess of the White House's first-ever briefing on "Drug Use and the Family," she tries to spur private-sector help in the fight against drug abuse among young people. Glancing over at a table filled with drug paraphernalia, the First Lady says: "I don't think I have ever felt as compelled about a problem as I have felt about the drug problem. I am scared to death for our children.'

Americans are beginning to draw the line against drugs.

Fed up with the impact drug abuse has everywhere from the home to the workplace, people across the country are marshaling their forces to take on one of the most pervasive social problems today

The fight is taking place in the living rooms of homes, among parents who have seen their children too easily become part of a marijuana culture. It's occurring in corporate board rooms, where officials are learning how drug abuse affects productivity and absenteeism.

It's going on in the paneled offices of Congress and state legislatures. Even inside the Pentagon, officials are examining the impact of drugs on discipline and, ultimately, on national security

The drug prevention movement is still in its infancy. Even as a loose network of parent groups organizes and regular use of marijuana by high school seniors appears to be tapering off, the use of other drugs is on the upswing. A recent study by the University of Michigan showed that regular use of marijuana by high school seniors from 1978 to 1981 dropped from 11 percent to 7 percent, but that stimulant use rose significantly. Drug trafficking into the United States is still rising at an alarming rate, and enforcement agencies, caught in a year of austerity, seem increasingly unable to stem the inflow

Yet with a new measure of soul-searching and increased dialogue, the US battle against drug abuse is being waged as never before. For the first time, many Americans are getting a handle on the problem

"For years we were told that there was nothing we could do, that the drug culture had won," says Marsha Suchard, an Atlanta housewife and English professor who, after seeing two of her children get involved with drugs, helped launch a nationwide antidrug parent group. "But now we know it hasn't won. And it isn't going to."

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The vivacious and committed organizer says she firmly believes there are thousands of other mothers and fathers "just as mad as I am," who realize that they might be able to make their voices heard

The antidrug campaign may be coming none too soon. In just two decades the abuse of drugs has gone from largely an isolated ghetto phenomenon and a few experimental "trips" by counterculture fringe groups to a major social problem, involving doctors, housewives, and lawmakers

A chief culprit is the cannabis sativa, a spindly plant with narrow leaves. As innocuous as it may look, this illegal crop enables an estimated 22 million Americans to get "high" regularly. More than 30 percent of all Americans have tried marijuana at least once, according to the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA). A comment by a retired businessman who now drives an airport limousine in Tampa, Fla., indicates the spread of the problem. Speeding across the causeway toward St. Petersburg, he chuckles, "I don't know why they just don't legalize marijuana. Everyone smokes it and look how much money they spend trying to stop it. Besides, if we grandparents think it's OK, who's against it, right?"

What was once a so-called recreational drug used by college and then high-school students, has now filtered down to junior high and even elementary school. More high school seniors now smoke pot daily than drink alcohol, reports NIDA. Between 1975 and 1978 marijuana use among high-school seniors jumped 100 percent, the institute adds

Nor does the problem stop with smoking "reefers" (marijuana cigarettes.) A bewildering array of drugs has slipped into the social milieu, among the most popular being cocaine. Indeed, this \$100-an-ounce drug that has become an emblem of wealth and status in many social circles has tempted an estimated 20 million Americans. And its street value - an estimated \$30 billion in sales in 1980 - now surpasses marijuana. "If people could afford it," says one alcohol and drug therapist, "cocaine would become the No. 1 drug of choice in America." Close to 50 metric tons of the powdery-looking substance have been smuggled in recent years into the United States, most of it from South America, estimates the US Drug Enforcement Administration. The DEA's largest drug bust ever occurred just this year in south Florida. It involved nearly 4,000 pounds, or \$1 billion worth, of cocaine.

This trafficking is taking a toll. Increased drug use is being linked to crime rates and auto accidents, as well as being blamed for breaking up some families and threatening the discipline of schools

Dealing in illegal drugs has become an estimated \$90 billion-a-year industry. "Only Exxon is bigger than the illegal drug trade in this country," says H. Ross Perot, a millionaire Texas businessman who heads up a task group in that state to combat drug abuse

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Traditionally, the curtailment of illegal drug use has been left to police agencies. But after years of seeing such efforts founder in an ever-swelling drug tide, law enforcement agencies still capture only an estimated 10 percent of the total influx. Many experts say it's time to attack the problem at the other end: to dry up America's demand for illegal drugs

Drug-abuse prevention hasn't had a particularly illustrious record. For years experts have been unable to agree on the potentially harmful effects of marijuana. Nor has there been much consensus on how to temper its use. Even today, physicians, counselors, educators, and religious leaders remain divided

Until 1974, US drug prevention efforts didn't even exist. But previous to the 1960s there had been little or no national problem of illegal drug-taking. When prevention efforts did spring into being during the Nixon administration to deal with returning, heroin-addicted Vietnam veterans, federal programs didn't go much beyond distributing publications and setting up model antidrug programs for communities and schools. Making effective prevention doubly tough was the fact that a chief institution in the struggle, the family, was itself coming under new social pressures. Many observers say the decline in the traditional family unit fostered a climate conducive to increased drug-taking.

Parents continue to be among the most visible standard-bearers in the battle against drugs. Families across the country - many of whom, like the Suchards, have experienced the harmful effects of drug abuse firsthand - are banding together to solve the problem. At least 3,000 such groups are believed to exist. Two years ago several groups formed their own umbrella organization, the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth. Members of these feisty little groups are putting out prevention newsletters and antidrug pamphlets, hosting conferences, and fighting for passage of stiffer trafficking laws and for regulations* governing shops that sell drug paraphernalia

A first step for many of the grass-roots organizers is to disseminate the latest information on the hazards of drugs. Then, garnering the support of other local parents, they set out to shape rules and regulations in homes, schools, and communities at large. In some states, local drug efforts parallel efforts to enact tougher drinking statutes

But the drive by parents isn't without its detractors. Some civil libertarians worry that the groups may become overzealous in their legislative maneuvering and push through laws that may infringe on individual rights. Their efforts are also opposed by the drug paraphernalia manufacturers, who don't want to see their business diminished

Yet, by and large, there has been little overt opposition to most of the grass-roots efforts. Even the president of a Washington-based pro-marijuana lobby group, the Alliance for Cannabis Therapeutics, has, in effect, conceded there is a problem by saying, "Any parent who doesn't control his child's intake of drugs is negligent."

Local prevention drives are being heartily backed by the Reagan administration. Dr. Carlton Turner, the White House drug adviser, has called the movement "the biggest groundswell of support I've ever seen." First Lady Nancy Reagan has made drug prevention her cause celebre. Yet some outside critics see this as not much of a substitute for administration cutbacks in other areas. The NIDA's proposed prevention budget has been slashed by almost 100 percent from last year's, confining the agency's work mostly to research and publication. Many worry that such a hefty cut will jeopardize individual state prevention programs that rely on NIDA direction and financing. Already, the DEA prevention department is closing down

In its reshuffling, the administration is enlisting the support of ACTION, the White House volunteer agency, to aid parent groups. White House drug adviser Turner has also set some high goals. He wants to see drug abuse in high schools reduced by one-third over the next two years. One way he proposes doing this is by setting up at least one parent-run drug prevention group in every high school in the country

Why is the war on drugs now being waged so vociferously

One reason may be the growing evidence of the hazards connected with drugs. After years of contradictory scientific findings, the case against marijuana is beginning to solidify

By the end of the 1970s, new evidence had begun to percolate down from university research facilities regarding the harmful effects of regular marijuana use. A blue-ribbon panel of the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine just two months ago released the most comprehensive report to date on the effects of the drug. Twenty-two

independent experts met for more than 15 months distilling almost every piece of research ever published on marijuana. Although their findings considered the research to date "particularly inadequate," the independent experts also found that marijuana was far from harmless and that its use "justified serious national concern." And while it stopped short of attributing any permanent damage to regular marijuana use, the panel did find the drug particularly damaging to juvenile users.

The dawning of such new research coincided with something occurring right under parents' noses - namely some profound changes in the personalities of marijuana-smoking children. Parents, teachers, and doctors began to notice significant losses of drive and motivation among regular drug users. Parents became concerned when their drug-using children began skipping school, lying, stealing, and even selling drugs - all to keep support their drug use. This combination of lab and living-room evidence of marijuana's harm was enough to open many a parent's eyes

"There is a whole reawakening to the health perspectives in this country," says Lee Dogoloff, executive director of the American Council on Marijuana (ACM), an anti-marijuana group. Others refer to it as a "physical fitness revival" that they interpret as a return to more traditional ways of coping with stress and boredom. ACM and other observers point to the decline in cigarette smoking rates during the past 10 years as evidence that facts do affect people's choices and decisions

Clearly the nation's parents are beginning to rise to the challenge and educate themselves and their children as to the facts. But much more needs to be done. Many point to the private sector as the logical new partner in attacking the problem of drug abuse among the post-teen crowd - a problem heretofore largely ignored. Although many unions and companies have worked to expand employee assistance programs to include drug-abuse counseling, observers say more candor and more creative solutions are needed. With congressional prodding, the US armed forces, one of the country's largest employers, have leaped to the fore with some of the most stringent antidrug-use measures around. Many see the military as the first major institution to tackle the problem head on. Next: What parents have achieved and how Where to write for further informatio

National Institute on Drug Abuse 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Md. 2085

PRIDE Parents Resources and Information on Drug Education Georgia State University University Plaza Atlanta, Ga. 3030

ACTION Drug Use Prevention Program 806 Connecticut Ave. NW Washington, D.C. 2052

National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth 9805 Dameron Drive Silver Spring, Md. 2090

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