

American teens are less likely than European teens to use cigarettes and alcohol

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The U.S. had the second-lowest proportion of students who used tobacco and alcohol compared to their counterparts in 36 European countries, a new report indicates.

The results originate from coordinated school surveys about [substance use](#) from more than 100,000 students in some of the largest [countries](#) in Europe like Germany, France and Italy, as well as many smaller ones from both Eastern and [Western Europe](#).

Because the methods and measures are largely modeled after the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future surveys in this country, comparisons are possible between the U.S. and European results. The 15- and 16-year-old students, who were drawn in nationally representative samples in almost all of the 36 countries, were surveyed last spring. American 10th graders in the 2011 Monitoring the Future studies are of the same age, so comparisons are possible.

The differences found between adolescent behaviors in the U.S. and Europe are dramatic, according to Lloyd Johnston, the principal investigator of the American surveys.

About 27 percent of American students drank alcohol during the 30 days prior to the survey. Only Iceland was lower at 17 percent, and the average rate in the 36 European countries was 57 percent, more than twice the rate in the U.S.

The proportion of American students [smoking cigarettes](#) in the month prior to the survey was 12 percent—again the second lowest in the rankings and again only Iceland had a lower rate at 10 percent. For all European countries the average proportion smoking was 28 percent, more than twice the rate in the U.S.

"One of the reasons that smoking and drinking rates among adolescents are so much lower here than in Europe is that both behaviors have been declining and have reached historically low levels in the U.S. over the 37-year life of the Monitoring the Future study," Johnston said. "But even in the earlier years of the European surveys, drinking and smoking by American adolescents was quite low by comparison.

"Use of illicit drugs is quite a different matter."

The U.S. students tend to have among the highest rates of use of all of the countries. At 18 percent, the U.S. ranks third of 37 countries on the proportion of students using marijuana or hashish in the prior 30 days. Only France and Monaco had higher rates at 24 percent and 21 percent, respectively. The average across all the European countries was 7 percent, or less than half the rate in the U.S.

American students reported the highest level of marijuana availability of all the countries and the lowest proportion of students associating great risk with its use—factors that may help to explain their relatively high rates of use here, according to Johnston.

The U.S. ranks first in the proportion of students using any illicit drug other than marijuana in their lifetime (16 percent compared to an average of 6 percent in Europe) and using hallucinogens like LSD in their lifetime (6 percent vs. 2 percent in Europe). It also ranks first in the proportion reporting ecstasy use in their lifetime (7 percent vs. 3 percent in Europe), despite a sharp drop in their ecstasy use over the previous

decade. American [students](#) have the highest the proportion reporting lifetime use of amphetamines (9 percent), a rate that is three times the average in Europe (3 percent). Ecstasy was seen as more available in the U.S. than in any other country.

For some drugs, however, the lifetime prevalence rate in the U.S. was just about the average for the [European countries](#), including inhalants (10 percent), cocaine (3 percent), crack (2 percent), heroin (1 percent) and anabolic steroids (1 percent).

"Clearly the U.S. has attained relatively low rates of use for cigarettes and alcohol, though not as low as we would like," Johnston said. "But the level of illicit drug use by adolescents is still exceptional here."

Provided by University of Michigan

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