

# Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

By asking college students to recall their first exposure to and use of alcohol, tobacco, and seven illicit drugs and three prescription drug types (nonmedically), the researchers were able to determine exposure opportunity and initiation of substance use. Alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana were usually the first drugs available to students. Exposure to illicit and prescription drugs generally began at the age of 16. By sophomore year of college, nearly all of the students had the opportunity to try alcohol and a large majority had the chance to try marijuana and tobacco.

As the students got older, the proportion who had ever used these drugs continued to grow, with marijuana being the most prevalent drug used (55.6%). By their sophomore year in college, more than one in five students had used prescription stimulants nonmedically (22.6%), one in six had used prescription analgesics (16.9%), and one in 10 had used hallucinogens (11.5%). Particularly concerning were the sizeable increases (more than 300%) in prevalence of nonmedical prescription stimulant and cocaine use during the first two years of college.

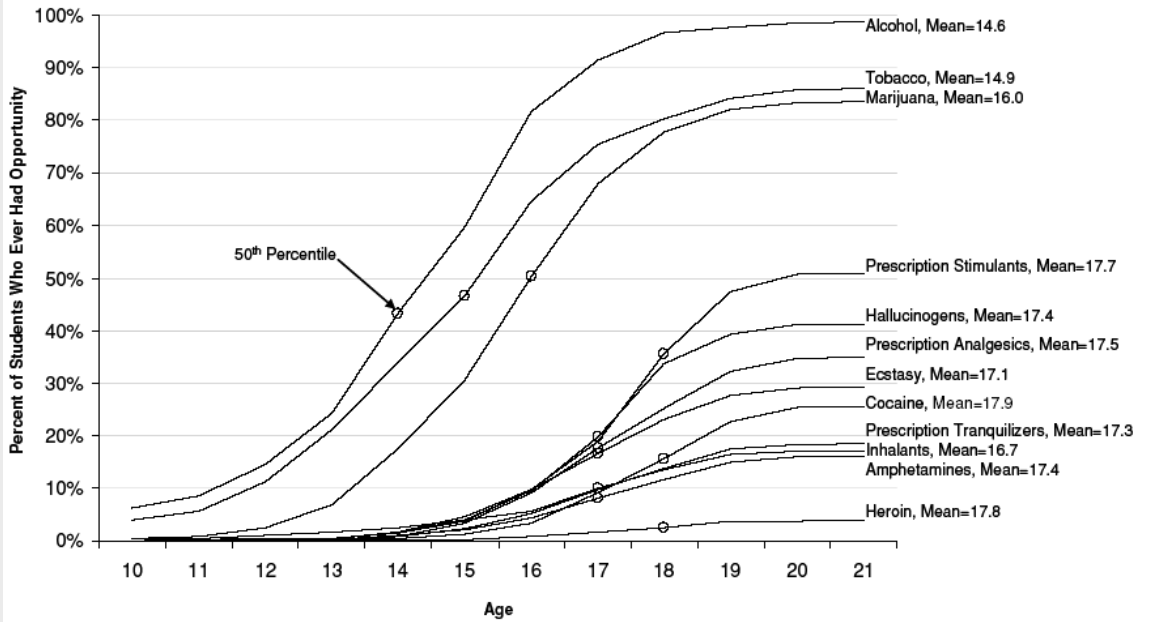
**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** Given that many students begin using illicit drugs in college, prevention activities should extend beyond the high school years. Colleges and universities should leverage opportunities for early intervention and treatment. Existing prevention efforts in middle- and high-school settings should be adapted to the unique college environment. Because college students are such a captive audience, it is important to reach out to them while they are still on campus and within reach. At risk students can be identified early and given the help they need to understand the risks involved in alcohol consumption and illicit drug use on their academic performance, mental health, and potential for addiction. Additionally, campus health centers need to be equipped to deal with emerging substance use problems through prevention, early identification, evaluation, and treatment.

### *Of major interest to:*

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



**Table 1. Cumulative weighted frequency of exposure opportunity to use alcohol, tobacco, and ten other drugs by age in year**



Graphed lines depict the weighted cumulative percent of all students who ever had the opportunity to try a substance by each age, as of the sophomore year of college. Circles on the graph indicate the age by which 50% of all students who were ever exposed to the substance had experienced their first opportunity. The mean age at first opportunity is reported for all students who ever had the opportunity to try a substance. Amphetamines include methamphetamine, but do not include prescription or over-the-counter medications.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.



### About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college.

Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit [www.cls.umd.edu](http://www.cls.umd.edu) or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at [aarria@umd.edu](mailto:aarria@umd.edu).

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