



# Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

## Prisoners and Drugs

Almost a third of all State prisoners in 1979 were under the influence of an illegal drug when they committed the crimes for which they were incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> More than half had taken drugs during the month just prior to the crime. More than three-fourths had used drugs at some time during their lives, but only one-fourth of the drug users had ever been in a drug treatment program.

Information on the extent to which prison inmates had used drugs was obtained from the 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities.<sup>2</sup> Inmates were asked about their experience with eight specific substances: heroin, methadone (outside of a treatment program), cocaine, marijuana or hashish, amphetamines, barbiturates, and LSD and PCP. They were also asked if they had ever used any other drugs without a doctor's prescription.

### Drug measurement

This report focuses on three measures of drug use—lifetime use, use in the month prior to the crime for which the inmate was sent to prison, and use at the time of that crime.

Unlike alcohol, whose various forms can be reduced to the common denominator of ethanol, the potency of drugs and their effect on the user varies not only among drugs but also according to their purity.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, no attempt was made to determine how much of each drug had been used on any one occasion or the extent to which the user was affected by it. Instead, inmates were asked a series of questions about each drug beginning with

<sup>1</sup>The terms "drug," "illegal drug," and "substance" are used interchangeably in this report and include prescription drugs obtained or used illegally as well as controlled substances.

<sup>2</sup>The survey consisted of personal interviews with a stratified random sample of 12,000 inmates in State prisons across the Nation. It was conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the Bureau of the Census.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of alcohol use among prison inmates see the Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletin "Prisoners and Alcohol," January 1983.

March 1983

This is the fourth in a series of bulletins based on the 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities. A bulletin on criminal careers will be published shortly, and other topics in the survey will be the subject of future bulletins. Public-use computer-readable data tapes for both the survey and the companion 1979 Census of State

Correctional Facilities are available from the Criminal Justice Archives and Information Network of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Further information can be obtained by writing CJAIN, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.  
Steven R. Sclesinger  
Acting Director, BJS

whether they had ever used it and ending with whether they were under its influence at the time of the crime for which they were imprisoned. This order,

moving from general use to use at the time of the crime, was adopted to minimize attempts by inmates to cite drugs as the reason for their crimes.

Table 1. United States population age 18 and over and State prison inmates, by percent using each type of drug<sup>1</sup>

	Ever used		Recent use <sup>2</sup>		Under influence at time of crime: inmates
	Inmates	General	Inmates	General	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
No drug	22	60 <sup>3</sup>	44	80 <sup>3</sup>	67
Any drug	78	40 <sup>3</sup>	56	20 <sup>3</sup>	33
Heroin	30	2	12	(2)	9
Methadone	9	1	2	(2)	1
Cocaine	37	14	13	4	5
Marijuana	75	39	48	18	17
Marijuana only	21	22	23	NA	8
Amphetamines	37	9	10	1	5
Barbiturates	35	6	10	(2)	6
Hallucinogens <sup>4</sup>	30	13	6	2	4

NOTE: The sum of percents for individual drug use exceeds the percent using "any drug" because many persons used more than one. "Any drug" includes miscellaneous drugs not shown separately because comparable statistics were not available for the inmates and the general population.

NA Not available.

Z Less than 0.5 percent.

<sup>1</sup>Statistics for the general population are from National Survey on Drug Abuse: Main Findings, 1979, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

<sup>2</sup>"Recent" refers to the month prior to the crime committed for inmates and the month prior to the survey for the general population.

<sup>3</sup>Figure is based on a 1982 NIDA finding that the total number of drug users is slightly higher than that for marijuana.

<sup>4</sup>For the inmate population, hallucinogens include LSD and PCP only; for the general population, hallucinogens include some additional drugs, which represent a very small proportion of total drug use.

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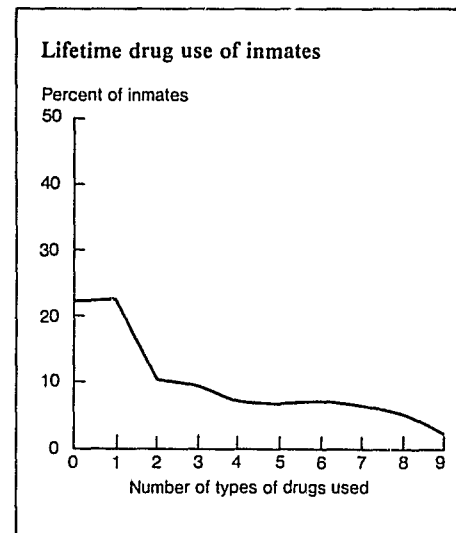


Figure 1

Validity of the findings depends entirely on the truthfulness of the inmates. Each inmate was promised the complete confidentiality of his response.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, one would expect that an inmate would be more likely to deny past use of an illegal substance than to report a use that did not occur. Therefore, the extent of drug use reported in the survey, if anything, is understated.

#### Drug use

Marijuana was by far the drug most commonly used by the inmates. Three-quarters had used it at some time in their lives, roughly the same proportion as had used any illegal drugs (table 1). Therefore almost all inmates who had used only one drug had used marijuana and almost all inmates who had used other drugs had also used marijuana.

Drug experts find this to be a characteristic of the general population as well; the total number of drug users is only slightly larger than the total number of marijuana users (table 1).

One-fifth of the inmate population had never used any drugs and one-fifth had used only marijuana. At the other extreme, one-fifth had used six or more different illegal drugs (figure 1).

With the exception of marijuana (and of methadone, used by only 9% of the inmates), there was little variation in drug abuse (table 1). Heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, barbiturates, and hallucinogens (LSD and PCP) had each been used by a third of the inmates.

Compared to lifetime use, recent use by inmates (defined as use during the month before the crimes that brought

<sup>4</sup>The confidentiality of information collected by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Justice Statistics is protected by Title 13, USC and 42 USC 3789(9).

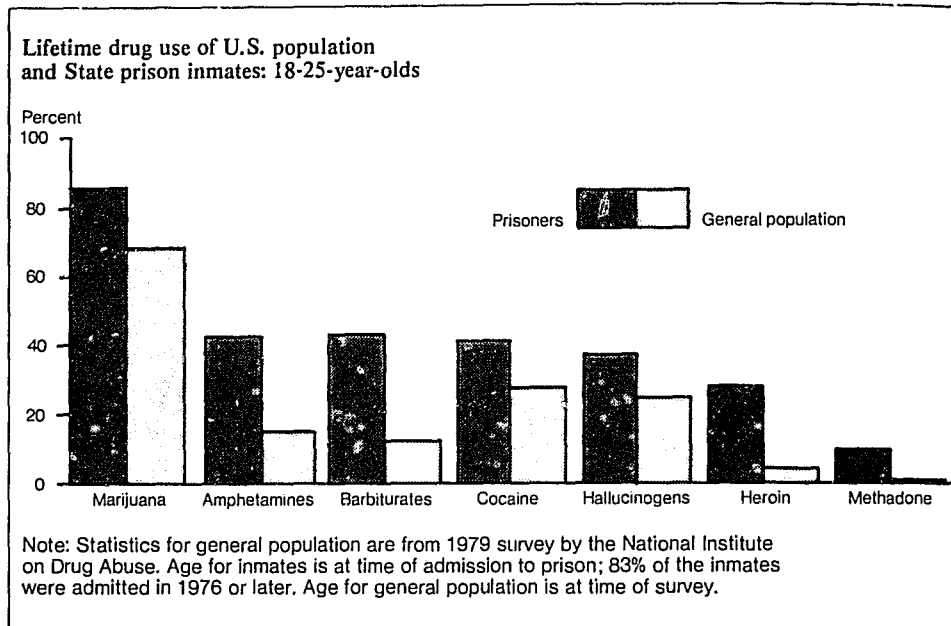


Figure 2

them to prison) was substantially lower for all drugs. The number of inmates who used nothing but marijuana during that month is the same as the number who had never used anything but marijuana, one-fifth of all inmates. Given the wide use of marijuana, these are not necessarily the same people.

#### Inmates and others

Inmates were about twice as likely as the public at large to have used drugs. Nonetheless, the proportion who had used only marijuana was the same for both groups—one-fifth. Consequently, persons who had used only marijuana accounted for half of all the drug users in the general population but only one-fourth of all the inmate users.

For all other drugs, use by the general population was substantially below that of the inmates. The greatest difference was for heroin, used by only 2% of the public at large but by one-third of the inmates. Aside from marijuana, the most popular drugs among the general population were cocaine and hallucinogens, each used by one of every seven people.

Recent drug use for the general population (defined as during the month before they were surveyed) was also substantially lower than for the inmates. Almost three-fourths of the inmate drug users had used drugs recently compared to only one-half the drug users in the general population. In the public at large, almost all recent drug users had used marijuana. One-fifth had used cocaine, and one-tenth, halluci-

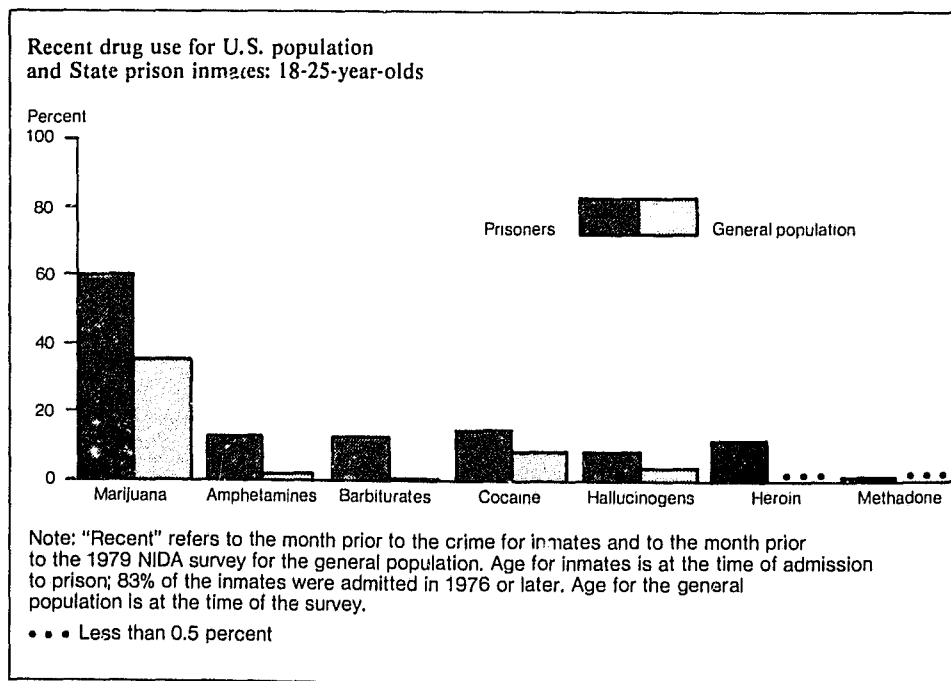


Figure 3

Note: "Recent" refers to the month prior to the crime for inmates and to the month prior to the 1979 NIDA survey for the general population. Age for inmates is at the time of admission to prison; 83% of the inmates were admitted in 1976 or later. Age for the general population is at the time of the survey.

• • • Less than 0.5 percent

nogens. Use of the other drugs was minor, involving one percent or less of the population.

#### Drug trends

Drug experts generally agree that there are popular trends in drug use. A drug quite popular at one time may be less so at another. For example, it is generally acknowledged that cocaine—the most expensive of all drugs—is growing in popularity while there are some signs that use of hallucinogens may be on the decline. Consequently, current profiles of lifetime drug use may vary somewhat from those that existed for prison inmates and the general population at the time they were surveyed.

#### Lifetime drug use

Lifetime drug use is a constant for an individual once he has become a drug user. For example, a person who first uses heroin at age 20 will be "a person who has used heroin" for the rest of his life regardless of whether he ever uses it again. It is also true that the older a person becomes without using illegal drugs, the less likely he is to start.

Both these factors come into play when comparing lifetime drug use for persons in different age groups. Many people alive now were past the prime years for first drug use when drug use became widespread during the sixties. Because of this, lifetime drug use in 1979 was substantially greater for persons age 18-25 years old than for persons age 26 or older (table 2). As those who were age 18-25 in 1979 continue to move through the life cycle, this relationship between older and younger users is not likely to hold.

Even in 1979 this relationship was not as strong for State prison inmates. The difference in lifetime use between 18-25-year-olds and inmates age 26 and older was small for most drugs and the older inmates were slightly more likely to have used heroin than the younger ones.<sup>5</sup>

#### Young users

When only the 18-25-year-olds are considered, the difference in lifetime use for prison inmates and the general population is diminished, although the inmates still had a higher rate of use for every drug than did young people in general (figure 2). The proportional difference is the least for marijuana, which had been used by 7 of every 8 inmates and 2 of every 3 noninmates.

For 18-25-year-olds, the difference between inmates and others in recent drug use are proportionately greater than the differences in lifetime drug use, the same relationship that held when all ages were considered. Again, drug use by young

<sup>5</sup>The age of inmates is their age at admission to prison; over 80% were admitted after 1975.

Table 2. Drug habits of inmates, by selected characteristics

Characteristic	Number	Percent							
		Any drug		Heroin		Cocaine		Marijuana	
		Ever used	Recent use	Ever used	Recent use	Ever used	Recent use	Ever used	Recent use
Total	274,564	78%	56%	30%	12%	37%	12%	75%	48%
Sex									
Male	263,484	78	56	30	12	37	13	76	48
Female	11,080	67	47	38	18	36	12	62	32
Age at admission									
Under 18	6,412	82	66	15	7	28	12	81	62
18-25	139,251	87	67	28	12	41	15	86	60
26-34	81,533	79	53	40	15	42	13	76	43
35 and over	46,501	46	25	21	9	20	5	41	16
Race									
White	136,296	78	57	30	11	40	13	76	49
Black	131,329	77	54	30	13	35	12	74	46
American Indian <sup>1</sup>	5,440	79	49	21	5	35	8	77	44
Other <sup>2</sup>	1,499	75	50	37	17	38	10	71	38
Ethnicity									
Hispanic	25,816	83	59	48	27	36	11	78	44
Non-Hispanic	248,748	77	55	28	11	38	13	75	48
Marital status									
Married	61,420	73	49	32	13	35	11	69	41
Widowed	6,248	47	26	20	7	21	8	45	19
Divorced	46,314	70	47	29	11	35	10	68	38
Separated	18,169	73	52	39	15	39	12	69	40
Never married	142,414	84	63	29	12	39	14	82	56
Education at admission									
Not high school graduate	196,047	77	55	28	12	34	12	74	47
High school graduate	50,359	80	55	34	13	43	13	78	48
Any college	28,158	78	56	34	13	48	18	76	47
Employment in month prior to current offense									
Employed full-time	165,577	74	51	26	9	34	11	72	44
Employed part-time	27,223	80	58	26	11	35	13	77	50
Not employed, seeking job	38,230	86	65	35	16	42	14	83	56
Not employed, not seeking job	42,433	83	66	44	22	48	18	80	53
Income in year prior to current offense <sup>3</sup>									
Total	128,011	78	55	27	9	37	13	76	47
None	2,218	75	54	24	13	28	9	74	48
Less than \$3,000	35,503	79	55	20	7	30	10	76	49
\$3,000-9,999	48,511	78	52	26	9	35	11	76	45
\$10,000 and over	41,779	78	58	34	12	47	18	75	49
Offense									
Violent	157,742	75	53	27	11	34	11	73	45
Homicide	48,041	64	41	19	6	24	7	62	35
Assault	17,216	73	47	22	8	28	7	70	41
Rape	16,460	64	39	14	4	21	6	62	36
Robbery	68,324	86	66	38	18	45	16	84	56
Other violent	7,701	79	59	26	9	40	17	77	51
Property	85,562	80	58	30	11	39	13	78	50
Burglary	49,223	85	64	31	12	42	14	83	57
Forgery or fraud	11,505	69	45	29	11	35	12	64	34
Larceny	13,018	78	53	33	13	39	12	75	44
Other property	11,815	75	51	23	6	33	9	73	47
Drugs	19,420	92	74	54	31	63	24	87	57
Public order	10,982	69	42	22	5	28	9	67	39

NOTE: Numerical detail for a particular characteristic may not add to the total due to non-responses, which in no case exceed 0.4%. "Recent" refers to the month prior to the crime committed.

<sup>1</sup>Includes Eskimos and Aleuts.  
<sup>2</sup>Asians and Pacific Islanders.  
<sup>3</sup>To reduce the effect of inflation upon income figures, only inmates admitted to prison after 1977 are included.

inmates exceeded that of young people in general for every substance and again the proportional difference was least for marijuana (figure 3).

#### User characteristics

Male inmates were somewhat more likely than female inmates to have used some form of drugs and to have used them recently (table 2). These differences were not large and disappeared entirely for

cocaine. Heroin use, as well as recent heroin use, was somewhat more common among the women.<sup>6</sup>

Drug use varied little among racial and ethnic groups. American Indians were less likely than other racial groups to have

<sup>6</sup>Women confined to local jails are also more likely to use heroin than male jail inmates. See Profile of Jail Inmates: Sociodemographic Findings from the 1978 Survey of Inmates of Local Jails, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1980.

Table 3. Lifetime and recent drug use, for inmates with and without illegal income

Type of drug	Ever used			Recent use <sup>1</sup>		
	All inmates <sup>2</sup>	With illegal income	Without illegal income	All inmates <sup>2</sup>	With illegal income	Without illegal income
Number	274,564	27,380	198,579	274,564	27,380	198,579
Percent	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
No drug	22	7	26	44	17	51
Any drug	78	93	74	56	83	49
Heroin	30	56	24	12	28	9
Methadone	9	21	7	2	4	1
Cocaine	37	70	30	13	29	9
Marijuana	75	91	71	48	70	42
Amphetamines	37	59	31	10	20	8
Barbiturates	35	58	29	10	19	8
LSD	24	43	20	4	9	3
PCP	19	35	15	5	10	4
Other	20	41	15	6	12	4

NOTE: The sum of percents for individual drug use exceeds the percent using "any drug" because many persons used more than one.  
<sup>1</sup>"Recent" refers to the month prior to the crime committed.  
<sup>2</sup>Includes inmates for whom income information was not collected because they were not free for at least a year prior to present incarceration (48,605).

used heroin, and blacks were less likely than whites to have ever used cocaine. Hispanics were substantially more likely than others to have used heroin and to have used it recently.

Inmate use of illicit drugs peaked among those age 18-25, declined moderately for those age 26-34, and dropped off sharply among those age 35 years and older. Heroin use was greatest for those age 26-34.

Education and marital status are strongly related to age. Patterns of drug use reflect this. For example, drug use was highest among the never married, in general a young group, and lowest among the widowed, typically older inmates. Inmates who have not graduated from high school cluster among the youngest inmates and the oldest inmates, and their drug use patterns are a combination of those for both groups.

Inmates who had been employed either full- or part-time during the month prior to their crime were less likely than those not working to have ever used heroin and cocaine. They were even less likely to have used heroin and cocaine during that month.

**Income**

Inmate use of cocaine, at any time or recently, rises with income, reflecting its cost. The use of marijuana appears totally unrelated to income. Those who had no income and those who had high incomes were equally likely to have used heroin recently but those who had high incomes were the most likely to have ever used it.

All inmates who reported some income

had illegal income than for those who did not.

Use of more than one drug was also much higher for persons with illegal incomes. Over half of all persons with illegal income had used five or more drugs during their lives and 1 of every 12 had used five or more drugs in the month prior to the crime. The comparable figures for persons with only legal income are 1 of every 5 and 1 of every 50 (figure 4).

**User offenses**

As expected, inmates in prison for crimes involving drugs were more likely than other inmates to have used drugs (table 2). Nine-tenths had lifetime drug use and three-fourths had used drugs recently. Inmates convicted of drug offenses were nearly twice as likely as other inmates to have used heroin and more than twice as likely to have used it recently. Their lifetime and recent use of cocaine were both twice the rate for other inmates.

About three-fifths of the drug users with drug offenses were in prison for trafficking rather than possession or use. This was true for all drug users, recent drug users, and even those who were under the influence of drugs at the time of their crime.

Although marijuana is by far the most commonly used drug—used at some time by three-fourths of the inmates, recently by half the inmates, and at the time of the crime by one-sixth of the inmates—less than 1% of the inmate population was serving time for marijuana possession or use.

After drug offenses, drug use was next highest among robbers and burglars of whom more than four-fifths had used drugs at some point in their lives, and about two-thirds in the month before their crimes. Murderers and rapists had low drug-use rates.

during the year before their crimes were asked its sources. Twelve percent volunteered that they had income from illegal sources (table 3).

Of all the data collected in the survey, this number must be the most suspect. Illegal income usually represents both untaxed income and an illegal act, facts that can hardly be conducive to reporting, pledges of confidentiality notwithstanding. Nevertheless, differences between those who cited illegal income and those who did not were striking.

For heroin, methadone, cocaine, amphetamines, barbiturates, LSD, PCP, and miscellaneous other drugs, the use of each, whether over a lifetime or over the month before the crime, was at least twice as high for inmates who said they

Table 4. Inmates under the influence of drugs at the time of the crime, for selected drugs

Offense	All inmates	Type of drug			
		Any drug	Heroin	Cocaine	Marijuana
Total	274,564	32%	9%	5%	17%
Violent	157,742	30	8	4	16
Homicide	48,041	21	4	2	11
Assault	17,216	27	5	2	13
Rape	16,460	22	2	2	15
Robbery	68,324	38	12	6	20
Other violent	7,701	34	6	6	19
Property	85,562	35	8	5	20
Burglary	49,223	40	8	5	24
Forgery or fraud	11,505	25	8	4	11
Larceny	13,018	30	10	6	15
Other property	11,815	30	5	3	18
Drugs	19,420	47	22	9	18
Public order	10,982	19	4	4	14

NOTE: Numerical detail may not add to total due to non-responses (less than 0.5%).

**Drugs and crime**

About a third of all inmates said that they were under the influence of drugs at the time of their offense (table 4). About half of these were under the influence of marijuana.

Half of all drug offenses were committed under the influence of drugs—a fifth under the influence of heroin. A fourth of all burglaries and roughly a fifth each of all robberies and all drug offenses were committed under the influence of marijuana. One-eighth of all robberies and one-tenth of all larcenies were committed under the influence of heroin. Cocaine did not play a significant role in the commission of any crimes.

**Criminal histories**

The more convictions inmates had on their records, the more likely they were to have taken drugs during the month prior to their offense (figure 4). Three-fifths of all inmates with five or more prior convictions had used drugs during the month prior to their crimes compared to just over two-fifths of those with no prior convictions. The recent use of heroin was also related to prior convictions. The proportion of inmates with five or more prior convictions who had used heroin in the month before their offense was 3 times greater than the corresponding proportion for those with no prior convictions.

The likelihood of having used more than one type of drug was also related to the number of prior convictions. One-sixth of the inmates with no priors had used five or more different substances; two-fifths of the inmates with five or more priors had used that many.

**Drug treatment programs**

Slightly more than a fourth of the 213,000 inmates who used drugs at some

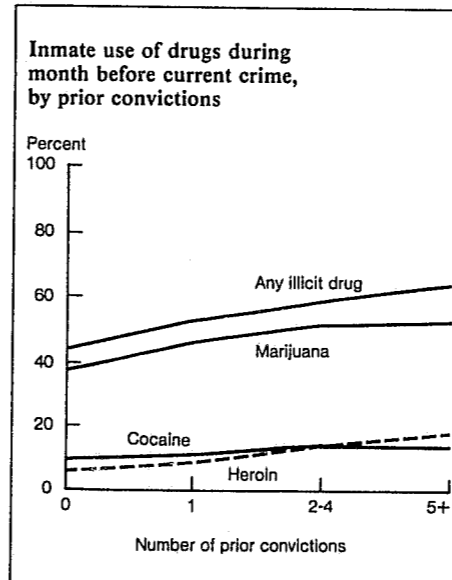


Figure 4

Table 5. Inmates' drug use and participation in drug treatment programs

Characteristic	Number of drug users	Percent ever in programs			Percent in programs at time of offense
		Total	One	Two or more	
<b>Ever used:</b>					
Any drug	213,131	26%	17%	5%	3%
Daily	142,473	36	23	8	5
Weekly	30,228	10	9	1	0
Less than weekly	40,430	5	4	1	(2)
<b>Heroin</b>	81,792	51	31	12	8
Daily	51,865	63	35	16	12
Weekly	7,265	39	30	7	2
Less than weekly	22,662	27	21	4	2
<b>Cocaine</b>	102,427	40	25	9	6
Daily	26,958	46	28	11	7
Weekly	14,986	39	23	10	6
Less than weekly	60,483	38	25	7	6
<b>Marijuana</b>	205,941	26	17	5	3
Daily	116,540	32	21	6	4
Weekly	36,176	20	13	5	2
Less than weekly	53,225	17	11	4	2
<b>Recently used:<sup>1</sup></b>					
Any drug	152,391	31	21	6	4
Daily	108,498	36	24	7	5
Less than daily	43,893	19	13	4	2
<b>Heroin</b>	33,425	59	34	14	10
Daily	24,082	62	35	16	12
Less than daily	9,343	49	32	11	6
<b>Cocaine</b>	34,213	40	25	9	7
Daily	13,546	48	30	10	7
Less than daily	20,667	36	22	8	6
<b>Marijuana</b>	130,374	29	20	6	4
Daily	85,861	32	22	6	4
Less than daily	44,513	24	15	6	3
<b>Under influence of drugs at time of offense<sup>2</sup></b>					
No	119,208	18	13	4	2
Yes	88,580	39	25	8	6

NOTE: "Any drug" includes heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and any other drug used. The sum of all drugs used exceeds the total ("any drug") because many persons used more than one drug. Percent detail may not add to totals shown because of rounding.

<sup>2</sup> Less than 0.5 percent.  
<sup>1</sup> "Recently" refers to the month prior to the crime committed.  
<sup>2</sup> Approximately 3% of the drug users did not provide this information.

time during their lives had ever been enrolled in a drug treatment program (table 5). A higher enrollment rate—about a third—was found among recent drug users. The rate rose to two-fifths for inmates who said they were under the influence of drugs at the time they committed their offense.

The more frequently the inmates used drugs, the more likely it was that they had been in a treatment program. Slightly more than a third of those who had ever used drugs on a daily basis had been in a program, compared to less than one-tenth of those who had never used drugs daily. Among recent users, approximately two-fifths of the daily users had been in drug treatment programs.

Heroin users were the most likely to have been in drug treatment programs, probably because of the highly addictive nature of that substance. About half of all lifetime heroin users had been in a treatment program, compared to about two-fifths of the cocaine users and one-fourth of the marijuana users.

**Drugs and alcohol**

It appears that illegal drug use is about

as pervasive among inmates as alcohol. Precise comparisons, however, are not possible. For example, 22% of the inmate population had never used drugs, whereas 17% of the inmate population had not used alcohol in the previous year.

Half the inmate population had been drug users daily at some point in their lives and two-fifths had recently used drugs daily. Most of this daily use involved marijuana. Less than one-fifth had ever used heroin on a daily basis and about one-tenth had used cocaine daily. In comparison, a third of the inmates drank daily during the year before their offense and two-thirds of those drank very heavily.<sup>7</sup>

Persons whose offenses were drug related were the least likely to drink heavily during the year prior to their offense and among the most likely to abstain altogether.

At the time of the offense, three-fifths of those under the influence of

<sup>7</sup> Heavy drinkers are those who consume a minimum of 4 ounces of ethanol—the equivalent of 3 cans of beer, 7 4-ounce glasses of wine, and nearly 9 ounces of 82-proof liquor.

drugs had also been drinking including two-fifths (or 12% of all inmates) who had been drinking very heavily.

Murderers, rapists, and violators of the public order were the least likely to have been under the influence of drugs at the time of the offense; drug offenders and burglars the most likely (table 4). Rapists and assaulters were the most likely, forgers and larcenists the least likely, to have been drinking prior to the offense.

Further reading

To obtain other National Prisoner Statistics reports or to be added to the bulletin and/or corrections mailing lists, write to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (301/251-5500), User Services Dept. 2, Box 6000, Rockville, Md. 20850. Other NPS bulletins include—

- Jail Inmates 1982, 2/83, NCJ-87161
- Prisoners and Alcohol, 1/83, NCJ-86223
- Prisoners 1925-81, 12/82, NCJ-85861
- Prisoners at Midyear 1982, 11/82, NCJ-84875
- Death-row Prisoners 1981, 7/82, NCJ-83191
- Prisons and Prisoners, 1/82, NCJ-80697
- Veterans in Prison, 10/81, NCJ-79232

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