



U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight



## Fathers and Substance Use

Fathers who abuse drugs not only hurt themselves but they hurt the closest people in their lives. While illicit substance use rates for men have declined since the 1970s, these rates remain higher for men than for women. This drug use is more common among young, less educated unmarried men in minority groups than among other fathers.

### Definitions

*Illicit substance use* refers to the use of drugs —such as cocaine, heroin, LSD, marijuana, PCP, Ecstasy, fentanyl, methamphetamine, morphine, ketamine, opium, peyote, psilocybin, THC, and any other substance not prescribed by a doctor—that the Controlled Substances Act defines as illegal substances.<sup>i</sup> The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM-IV)<sup>ii</sup> defines substance abuse as a pattern of substance use within a 12-month period that results in one or more of the following behaviors:

- Failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home,
- Use of illicit substances in physically hazardous situations
- Legal problems related to substance abuse, and/or
- Continued use of an illicit substance despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects of the substance.

In general, when a person's use of drugs is negatively affecting his or her ability to function as a member of society, it is a sign of abuse.

### Importance and Implications of Illicit Substance Use

Substance use and abuse can clearly harm the individual user. However, research suggests that a father's substance use can affect not only his well-being, but his relationships with partners and the well-being of any children he may have. Drug use puts fathers in a higher risk environment both physically and socially.

### Implications for Fathers

- Substances such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine are physically addictive and can lead to health risks, including pulmonary complications, liver disease, and respiratory problems. Prolonged use of these substances can lead to withdrawal symptoms, such as vomiting, insomnia, and general pain.<sup>iii iv v</sup>
- Possession, use, or sale of illicit substances is illegal. Consequently, individuals using these substances find themselves at risk of arrest and incarceration. Beyond the inherent criminality of illicit drug use itself, drugs and alcohol are frequently related to other crimes.<sup>vi</sup>
- Fathers not currently abusing drugs, but who have done so in the past and have been convicted of a crime as a result, may find it challenging to reenter society. Drug treatment that such men underwent as part of criminal sentencing may account for their recovery. Yet ex-offenders are automatically excluded from many jobs with licensing requirements, and many potential employers consider it too much of a risk to hire a person with a criminal record.<sup>vii</sup>

### Implications for Fathers' Involvement with Children

- Numerous studies have found associations between parental substance abuse and subsequent alcohol problems in children.<sup>viii, ix, x</sup>
- Father's illicit substance use has been linked with adolescent smoking, independent of the father-child relationship. Paternal tobacco and drug use has also been linked to poorer relationships with the children. This weak relationship can make it harder for the children of substance-abusing fathers to avoid smoking.<sup>xi</sup>
- Parental drug use is associated with poorer intellectual, sensory-motor, and behavioral development in young children.<sup>xii</sup>

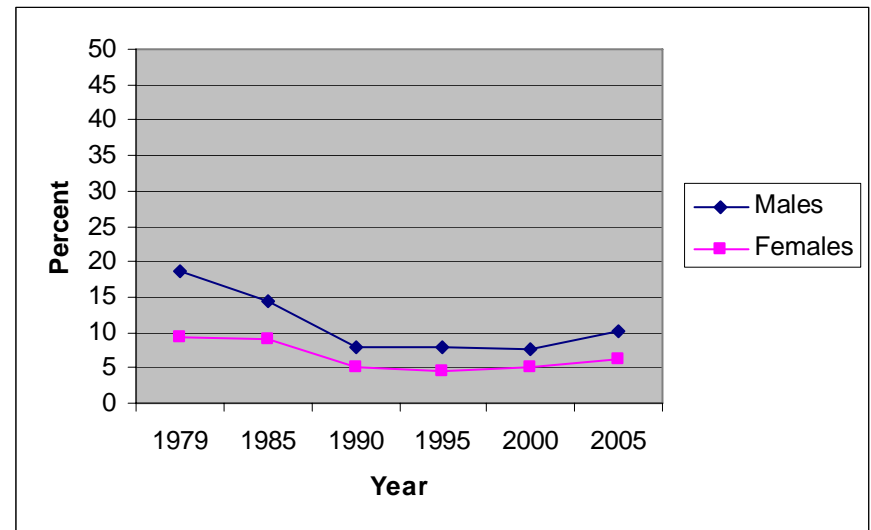
### Implications for Fathers' Partners

Fathers' relationship with their partners or spouses can suffer as a result of substance abuse. Substance abuse has been associated with marital stress, as well as with spousal abuse.<sup>xiii</sup> These low-quality relationships also have the potential to harm a child or children who are exposed to them.<sup>xiv, xv</sup>

### Trends in Substance Use Over Time

**Figure 1** shows that from 1979 to 2005, males were more likely than were females to report using illicit substances within the previous past month. Illicit substance use among males declined steadily through the 1980s, but increased again between 2000 and 2005. However, the increased proportions of people reporting illicit substances in 2005 may be due to changes in the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (see Definitions and Measurement section). For more information, see **Table 8**.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Males and Females who Reported Using Illicit Substances Over the Past Month, 1979-2005**



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1979-2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002

### Differences in Illicit Substance by Subgroup

#### Differences by Sex

**Table 1** shows that in 2005, a smaller proportion of fathers reported illegal drug use in the past month than did non-fathers. The same pattern held true for women who were mothers and those who were not, but the differences were not as sharp. More fathers reported substance use in the past 30 days than did mothers. However, the difference in male and female drug use was most apparent among non-parents. A higher percentage of males who were not fathers reported using drugs than did their female counterparts.

**Table 1. Percentage of Parents' Reporting Illicit Substance Use in the Past 30 days by Gender, 2005**

Substance Use	Fathers	Non-fathers	Mothers	Non-mothers
Any Use	7.4	11.2	5.8	6.3

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

*Differences by Age*

**Table 2** shows that fathers aged 18 to 25 were more likely than those in any other age group to report using an illicit substance in the past month. Most illicit drug use among fathers occurred during their 20s and early 30s. (See Definitions and Measurement section for NSDUH methodology.)

**Table 2. Percentage of Males and Fathers Reporting Illicit Substance Use in the Past Month by Age, 1985-2005**

Age	Males			Fathers
	1985	1995	2005	2005
12-17	16.4	12.1	9.8	2.7
18-25	30.2	17.0	24.8	18.5
26-34	25.7	11.2	15.0	11.4
35+	4.4	3.8	5.7	5.3

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002

*Differences by Education level*

**Table 3** shows that in 2005, fathers with a high school education or less were the most likely to have reported using illegal substances in the past month. Fathers who graduated college had the lowest reported substance use in the past month. (See Definitions and Measurement section for NSDUH methodology.)

**Table 3. Percentage of Men and Fathers 18 Years of Age and Older Reporting Illicit Substance Use in the Past Month by Education Level, 1985-2005**

Education Level	Males			Fathers
	1985	1995	2005	2005
Less than HS	10.3	9.2	12.9	13.8
HS Graduate	16.0	7.0	12.2	13.8
Some College	17.1	10.3	10.6	7.6
College Graduate	12.2	3.9	5.9	2.7

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1985-2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002

*Differences by Race/Ethnicity*

**Table 4** shows that black fathers had the highest reported substance use in the past month, compared with fathers in the other three racial/ethnic groups. White fathers had the second highest percentage of reported substance use in the past month. The same pattern held true for men in general. (See Definitions and Measurement section for NSDUH methodology.)

**Table 4. Percentage of Men and Fathers Reporting Substance Use in the Past Month by Race/Ethnicity, 1985-2005**

Race/Ethnicity	Males			Fathers
	1985	1995	2005	2005
White	13.6	7.5	10.2	9.4
Black	20.0	12.2	13.5	12.6
Hispanic	14.1	6.9	8.6	8.2
Other	14.3	4.1	7.0	7.4

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1985-2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002

*Differences by Marital Status*

**Table 5** shows that in 2005, never-married fathers had the highest reported substance use in the past month. Rates of widowed fathers' reported substance abuse in the past month were notably higher than rates of widowed men as a whole. (See Definitions and Measurement section for NSDUH methodology.)

**Table 5. Percentage of Men and Fathers Reporting Substance Use in the Past Month by Marital Status, 1985-2005**

Marital Status	Males			Fathers
	1985	1995	2005	2005
Married	8.1	3.1	4.9	5.6
Widowed	0.7	6.3	3.2	14.5
Divorced/ Separated	18.5	12.9	12.6	14.2
Never Married	29.4	16.4	20.0	19.0

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1985-2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002

*Differences by Income*

**Table 6** shows that in 2005, fathers with a family income of \$20,000 to \$49,999 had the highest reported substance use in the past month. However, among all men in 2005, those with a family income of less than \$20,000 had the highest reported substance use in the past month. (See Definitions and Measurement section for NSDUH methodology.)

**Table 6. Percentage of Men and Fathers Reporting Substance Use in the Past Month by Total Family Income, 1995-2005**

Family Income	Males		Fathers
	1995	2005	2005
Less than \$20,000	10.2	15.1	12.0
\$20,000-49,999	8.2	11.5	12.7
\$50,000-74,999	6.8	8.6	7.6
\$75,000+	3.9	7.0	6.7

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1995-2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002

*Differences by Employment Status*

**Table 7** shows that in 2005, unemployed fathers had approximately double the percentage of illicit drug use in the past month, compared with employed fathers. Unemployed men had the highest rates of substance use in the past month. (See Definitions and Measurement section for NSDUH methodology.)

**Table 7. Percentage of Men and Fathers Reporting Substance Use in the Past Month by Employment Status, 1985-2005**

Employment Status	Males			Fathers
	1985	1995	2005	2005
Employed	15.8	7.5	10.4	6.9
Not Employed	32.0	17.2	20.1	14.8

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005  
Data before 2002 should not be compared with data after 2002



