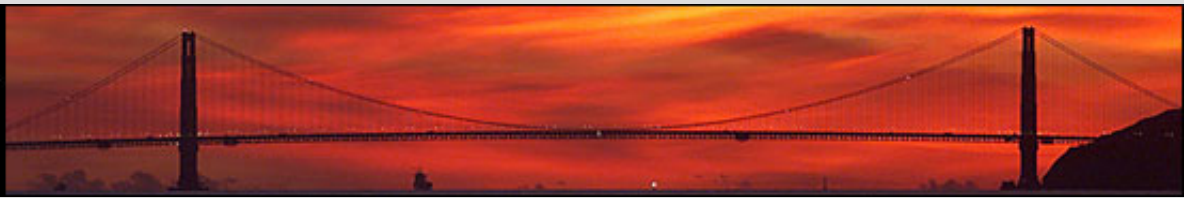


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San Francisco Chronicle

More girls than boys smoke and pop pills, survey finds

Ceci Connolly, Washington Post
Thursday, February 9, 2006

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Washington -- Teenage girls, having already caught up to their male peers in illegal drug use and alcohol consumption, now have the dubious distinction of surpassing boys in smoking and prescription drug abuse.

In the past two years, in fact, more young women than men started using marijuana, alcohol and cigarettes, according to government findings being released today.

The results are doubly disturbing, researchers say, because they run counter to trends indicating an overall decline in teen drug use and because young women appear to suffer more serious health consequences as a result.

"It's really sad the girls are winning," said Warren Seigel, chairman of pediatrics at Brooklyn's Coney Island Hospital.

"This isn't the game they should be winning at," he said.

Adolescent girls who smoke, drink or take drugs are at higher risk of depression, addictions and stunted growth. And because substance abuse often goes hand-in-hand with risky sexual behavior, they are more likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease or become pregnant, warns the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, which will announce its findings today in New York.

The new analysis is based on the 2004 National Survey on Drug

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Use and Health, which interviewed members of 70,000 households. Conducted annually by the federal government since 1971, the survey is a highly regarded detailed look at adult and teenage behaviors over three decades.

There is no single reason why girls are smoking, drinking and popping pills more than ever. Academics, therapists, teachers and teens themselves report that today's young women live in an increasingly stressful environment: Many are worried about their appearance, eager to date older boys or recovering from physical or sexual abuse. Unlike young men, who often use illegal substances for an adrenaline rush, teenage girls use alcohol or drugs to escape.

In many cases, concerns over weight and self-esteem factor heavily in girls' decisions to smoke or use prescription drugs.

The results came as something of a surprise to John Walters, director of the White House program, since illegal drug use by children ages 12 to 17 has fallen 19 percent in the last five years, a statistic touted by President Bush in his recent State of the Union Address.

"We want to make sure we continue the decline and deal effectively with the current circumstance," he said in an interview.

On the Web

Information about the National Survey on Drug Use and Health is online at www.oas.samhsa.gov/nhsda.htm

Page A - 16

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