Drug use by Louisiana teens

250,000 Louisiana 7th through 12th graders were surveyed on their drug habits last October. Here are the percentages who said they...

- Smoked cigarettes within the past year...
  - Grades 7-8: 27.6%
  - Grades 9-12: 38.2%

- Drank beer within the past year...
  - Grades 7-8: 39.6%
  - Grades 9-12: 59.8%

- Used marijuana within the past year...
  - Grades 7-8: 14.2%
  - Grades 9-12: 4.6%

Source: Louisiana Drug Summit

By DOUG MYERS
Capital News Bureau

The war on drugs has failed to stop alarming numbers of Louisiana teens from consuming alcohol and illegal drugs — but that's no surprise, according officials attending a drug summit here Wednesday.

Although state and federal governments keep pumping more money into anti-drug programs, state Attorney General Richard Leyoub said the good guys in the drug war are "outnumbered as an ingredient" by the bad guys. Leyoub said Louisiana citizens can no longer be apathetic but must "stop talking and start doing."

"If we win the war on drugs, we're going to win it in the kitchens, the living rooms, and dining rooms of our homes," said Thomas Gleaton, who presented the results of a recent survey of the drug and alcohol habits of 250,000 Louisiana students in seventh through 12th grades.

"The Louisiana Attorney General Richard Leyoub fields questions at a statewide drug summit, where participants heard alarming statistics about drug use among teens."

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"It's my home and your home that we've got to be concerned with," said Gleaton, president of PRIDE, a national anti-drug research organization.

Students were questioned about their use of cigarettes, beer, wine coolers, liquor, marijuana, cocaine, uppers, downers, inhalants and hallucinogens.

Statewide, results were available Wednesday. Gleaton said school-by-school results will be sent to schools soon and should be available to parents interested in teen drug use.

Researchers compared results from last October survey with results from the previous school year to gauge the change in drug and alcohol use.

Here are some of the statewide, year-to-year comparisons:

- Drug use increased in all categories except wine coolers (a small decrease) and the use of upper (unchanged).
- "Drug use — especially marijuana use — increased more sharply among black students than among white students. However, drug use continues to be more prevalent among white students than among black students.
- Use at school decreased in all categories except marijuana and inhalants, all of which were unchanged.
- At home, the students said they consumed more "gateway" drugs but fewer illicit drugs (except inhalants). "Gateway" drugs include beer, marijuana and cigarettes, which experts say often lead to the use of "hard drugs" such as cocaine and crack.
- Availability increased in all drug categories.
- "Our children use drugs like adults — at night and on the weekends," Gleaton said. "The fun time is the weekend — maybe it's Miller time."
- Gleaton said parents are "frughtened of drugs" but often turn their heads when their children use beer and cigarettes — without realizing those are "starter drugs" and open the gates to illicit drugs.
- That's unfortunate because the use of such drugs increases the teenage pregnancy rate, crime and the chances of getting the deadly AIDS virus, Gleaton said.

Dr. Harold Brandt, an internist and former chairman of the national board of directors of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, said summit delegates came up with several reasons for the growing drug problem — lack of parental involvement, parents allowing drinking at "social events," a decrease in public awareness and inadequate funding at state treatment facilities, among other things.

Aubrey Young, representing state drug treatment facilities, advocated more emphasis on ensuring that all people who need treatment can be helped by the state.

Young said needly people often are put on waiting lists because the centers are filled to capacity.

Gleaton and Leyoub were among 165 state and community leaders who attended the anti-drug summit sponsored by the state Drug Policy Board. The board was set up by the Legislature to bring together a variety of state agencies and community groups to address the state's drug problem.

Each delegation was asked to hold regional meetings aimed at improving drug problems locally.