Substance abuse common to La. youth
DHH survey confirms significant alcohol, drug use

By RANDY McCLAIN
Capitol news bureau

One-third of Louisiana’s high school seniors smoke cigarettes often, half drink alcohol regularly and one in 10 have used marijuana at least once in the past 30 days.

Those facts came out of a survey released Wednesday sponsored by the state Department of Health and Hospitals. The survey quizzed 131,000 children in sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th grades on health habits, drug abuse and behavior.

“This survey confirms what we already know. We have a significant problem with substance abuse among kids,” said Alton “Jake” Hadley, assistant secretary with the state’s Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

Hadley said the good news in the survey, conducted in November through January by Developmental Research and Programs Inc. of Seattle, was that Louisiana's youth are no worse than children throughout the country.

“But we should not be satisfied that we are like the rest of the country,” Hadley added.

The survey shows tobacco and alcohol are the main drugs of choice for young adults in the state, although marijuana, LSD, cocaine and inhalants like amyl and butyl nitrate are also popular.

Here are some numbers uncovered by the survey:

- Fifty-five percent of students surveyed said they have used alcohol at some point in their lives and one third reported drinking alcohol in the past 30 days.
- Older students drink more than younger ones. Half of all students in 12th grade reported drinking alcohol in the past 30 days and almost one third said they have engaged in binge drinking with friends. Those rates are roughly twice as high as the numbers reported for Louisiana eighth graders in the survey.
- Half of the youngsters in sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th grades have smoked cigarettes at least once in their lives and 22 percent have smoked in the past month, which the survey suggested is a strong indication of frequent use.

DHH officials said they hope to repeat the survey in two years.

“Those numbers are absolutely not acceptable,” Hadley said. 

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years to judge whether alcohol, cigarette and drug use among children is increasing or decreasing.

Hadley said the survey shows tobacco and alcohol abuse are the main problems among teenagers, although thousands of youngsters are also using marijuana, cocaine and other illegal drugs.

The report shows something needs to be done to reduce tobacco use among children, Hadley said.

“We already know 3,000 kids under 18 start smoking every day and one third of those will die prematurely because of tobacco use. That’s cause for great concern,” he said.

The survey shows thousands of youngsters have experimented with marijuana, LSD, cocaine and other illicit drugs, but Louisiana youngsters aren’t using hard drugs any more frequently than teen-agers in other states. In some cases, hard-drug use is less.

One in 10 Louisiana children reported using an illicit drug in the past 30 days, about the same as national averages.

Twenty-two percent of Louisiana youth surveyed reported using marijuana at least once in their lives, and 10 percent said they’ve smoked marijuana in the past 30 days. That also mirrors the national average.

Heroin, amphetamines and crack cocaine are less popular among school-age children in Louisiana than in the nation as a whole, the survey also shows.

Just 2 percent of 10th- and 12th-graders statewide reported any crack cocaine use, compared to 4 percent of students nationally at the same grade levels.

Six percent of 10th-graders and 8 percent of 12th-graders in Louisiana reported using amphetamines, far below the 17 percent of students in those grades nationally who say they have experimented with that drug.