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New research shows declining alcohol and cigarette use in New Zealand youth

A new study co-led by a Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington researcher shows that cigarette smoking is now rare in high school students, and binge drinking has declined since 2012.

These are some of the latest findings from the Youth19 Rangatahi smart study, part of the Youth2000 survey series, which has been running since 2001.

Less than three percent of high school aged students report lighting up weekly or more often, a decline from five percent in 2012. Binge drinking has declined but remains relatively common, with more than one in five students reporting binge drinking in the past month.

Weekly marijuana use is consistent with previous years' findings, and vaping has emerged as a new issue.

Associate Professor Terryann Clark from the University of Auckland, co-lead on the study, says these results are really encouraging, but it should be noted that there are still ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in terms of harm from these substances.

“The findings show large declines in drinking and smoking across all ethnic and socioeconomic groups over the past 18 years. But the overall decline in smoking hides the fact that Māori, Pacific, and low-income communities and small towns continue to bear a disproportionate burden of smoking harm,” she says.

In contrast, binge drinking was equally common across all school deciles, with students from higher income communities more likely to report binge drinking. Binge drinking was also more common among older students and those living in rural areas and small towns compared with urban areas.

Study co-author Dr Jude Ball, from the University of Otago, says the evidence shows that young people are starting to drink at an older age, which could be contributing to the decline.

The study found that binge drinking is now relatively uncommon in younger adolescents, but among those aged 17 or older, 42 percent reported binge drinking in the past month.

“Actions to prevent underage drinking and reduce alcohol harm remain vitally important and should be strengthened,” she says. “For example, we support calls to ban alcohol sponsorship in sport.”

Weekly marijuana use amongst students is lower than in 2001 but has not changed significantly since 2012. Other drug use, including synthetics, P, and huffing, is very low among secondary school aged students and has not increased.

Vaping has emerged as a new issue, with 12 percent of secondary school students reporting vaping monthly, and 8 percent weekly. Weekly vaping was more common among higher income communities.

Dr Terry (Theresa) Fleming from the University's Faculty of Health and co-lead on the study says that these findings show that it is possible to improve health and wellbeing among young people in important ways.

"Reduced drinking and substance use will have long-term benefits. We should learn from and build on these gains," she says.

For more information see www.youth19.ac.nz

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Issued by Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington

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