

Parental Alert: Drugs, Youth and the Internet

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness



This fact sheet discusses the prevalence of drug-related activity on the Internet, and the threat it poses to adolescents and young adults.

Adolescents and young adults have become the largest segment of the U.S. population with Internet access. Approximately 30 million children in the United States under 18 currently use the Internet, and more than 40 million are expected to be online by 2005. Because of the large numbers of adolescents and young adults who have access to the Internet, the threat posed by drug-related activity occurring on the Internet is quite serious. The large number of young Americans accessing the Internet

has encouraged illegitimate entrepreneurs--including drug offenders--to market and sell their products to young people through this powerful medium.

Drug-related activity is widespread on the Internet, and even the novice user has easy access to all the information needed to produce, cultivate, purchase, sell, or use any illegal drug, even relatively obscure ones. Many of the users participating in these drug-related activities are adolescents and young adults. Individuals who use illegal drugs or are contemplating their use can readily access information about them on Internet sites, including explanations of drug terminology and methods of use. Many of these sites popularize and glamorize drug use, and others implicitly promote use and experimentation. Drug distributors and customers utilize Internet sites to post and discuss drug prices. They also use Internet bulletin boards and chat rooms to arrange the sale of drugs or chemicals, which are then shipped to the customer for an agreed price. Recipes and detailed instructions for producing illicit drugs also are easily obtainable on the Internet. Many sites offer not only chemical formulas for drug production, but also easy-to-follow guidance about where and how to obtain precursor chemicals and necessary equipment without arousing the suspicion of law enforcement. Much of the information about drug production that is available on the Internet refers to marijuana, drug paraphernalia, or club drugs, which are all popular among young people.

Prevalence of Drug-Related Information on the Internet

The facilitation of drug use appears to be the most common drug-related activity on the Internet, and sites that facilitate drug use often are directed toward a younger audience.

Many Internet sites and forums also promote the production and sale of illicit drugs.

Use. Information about drug use is readily available on the Internet. Adolescents and young adults who are curious about a particular drug may research it on the Internet and thereby become exposed to thousands of sites that expound upon the positive effects of the drug and downplay or deny any negative effects. These sites frequently explain and use drug terminology and slang, thereby further acclimating visitors to drug culture. Many Internet sites mislead visitors by explaining how to use drugs, implying that if the drugs are used properly (by following the instructions provided) they pose no risk to the user. In addition, there are sites that advise visitors about how to use readily available products, such as cold medications, in order to obtain euphoric effects.

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Production. The Internet provides access to a vast amount of information about drug production, including processes, recipes, ingredients, and substitutes, and this information can be easily accessed by any individual with an Internet connection. Production equipment also is advertised widely, and chemicals needed in the production process can be ordered as well. Even the most inexperienced drug producer can easily obtain the instructions, chemicals, and equipment needed to synthesize many illegal drugs in a kitchen, bathroom, or basement laboratory. Misinformation is fairly common and can lead to serious injury, illness, or death.

Sale. Adolescents and young adults can easily search for user or wholesale quantities of drugs and find suppliers on the Internet. Illegal drugs and controlled substances are openly advertised, and suppliers arrange sales with customers via bulletin board discussions. Drug production equipment, chemicals, and other paraphernalia also are readily obtained through online stores. It is important to note that, as in the drug distribution arena outside the Internet, an individual who already has an established contact will have a much easier time purchasing drugs. For example, many Internet forums exist which are not indexed by search engines (not found by typing drug-related terminology into a search engine) and require word-of-mouth referral.

Challenges. It is particularly difficult for law enforcement to identify illegal drug-related Internet activities because information can be exchanged and sales consummated quickly and with relative anonymity over the Internet. Drug offenders are increasingly taking advantage of sophisticated technologies to hide their identities and illicit actions. Many individuals who once made only a cursory attempt at security are now taking advantage of chat rooms, e-mails, and private web rings or are protecting their sites with encryption, hidden text, passwords, and registration requirements in an attempt to evade law enforcement.

Legislators and law enforcement personnel are forced to develop new legal concepts and investigative procedures that can be used to address drug-related activities in cyberspace without creating jurisdictional problems or violating First Amendment rights. Various elements of the drug culture, relying on the difficulties involved in investigating and prosecuting Internet-based crimes, have engaged in drug-related activity on the Internet with an aura of invincibility, believing that they are impervious to prosecution. However, some recent successes by law enforcement against sites and their managers have begun to change these views.

Outlook. The use of the Internet to facilitate the production, sale, and use of illegal drugs presents challenges to law enforcement unlike any previously encountered, and these challenges are likely to increase as Internet use among teens and young adults expands and new Internet-related technologies are developed. Internet use in other regions of the world is likely to increase in the coming years, and a parallel rise in Internet-related crimes will create legal and jurisdictional issues. As the number and proficiency of users expand in the coming years, drug-related threats to young people who use the Internet can only be expected to proliferate.

Policymakers and demand reduction advocates should be aware of both the positive and negative impacts of this powerful medium on the youth of the United States. Likewise, parents, law enforcement officials, drug treatment providers, and others who interact with adolescents and young adults who are or may possibly become involved with drugs should understand the potential for misuse of the Internet so that they can effectively and proactively address this issue.

Information Provided By:
National Drug Intelligence Center
<http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs2/2161/2161t.htm>