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ESTABLISHED 1885

VOL. 102, NO. 218

FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 1986

25 CENTS

First encounter with drugs is found to occur at age 12

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BOSTON (AP)—A survey of youths at rehabilitation centers in eight states has found the average age of first-time drug users was 12, and that 65 percent said their parents were unaware of their use for more than a year.

Sixty-nine percent said they had used cocaine, more than double the number in a similar survey last year, according to the study released Monday by Straight Inc.

The survey was conducted Sept. 5 of 880 youths ages 12 to 21 who were being treated at Straight's eight centers, said James Murray, director of the New England center of the non-profit rehabilitation program.

The average age of first-time drug users was 12, a half-year decline from last year. In the majority of the cases, parents were unaware of their child's drug use for an aver-

age of 1½ to two years, Murray said. "Two years of not knowing, two years of agony for families and two years out of the life of a 14- or 15-year-old child," he said.

The high percentage of cocaine users was surprising "to the extent that a year ago our figures were so low," Murray said.

In a 1985 survey, 27.6 percent said they had used cocaine, while in 1984, 7.1 percent said they did.

"I think what's frightening is that cocaine is being marketed toward teen-agers," said Murray.

Crack, a highly potent, smokeable form of cocaine, especially reflects that trend, he said. "We're now selling the drug in vials available for \$10 to \$15 instead of a gram costing more than \$100," he said.

Forty-six percent said they were under age 12½ when they started using drugs. Seventy percent of those surveyed said they were in-

roduced to drugs by their friends, and 61 percent said they had used alcohol before drugs. More than one-third said they first tried drugs at home.

The survey results were similar at all the centers, Murray said.

An overwhelming majority of those surveyed admitted they were involved in crimes, he said. Ninety-five percent said they had committed misdemeanors; 60 percent admitted to felonies; 97 percent had shoplifted; 100 percent had been involved in vandalism.

"Clearly, if we could pull drugs and alcohol out of the lives of these young people, we can address a lot of other problems as well," Murray said.

Straight, which said it has treated more than 3,000 youths and their parents since it was founded in 1976 in St. Petersburg, Fla., also announced plans to provide free semi-

DRUGS



IN America

nars to educators or other professionals who work with children to help them detect signs of drug use.

The privately funded organization uses principles similar to Alcoholics Anonymous to rely on peer pressure and the entire family's involvement to combat teen-age drug addiction.

Straight centers are in Stoughton, Mass.; St. Petersburg and Orlando, Fla.; Marietta, Ga.; Milford, Ohio; Springfield, Va.; Plymouth, Mich.; and Richardson, Texas.