

## Alcohol, Tobacco, & Substance Use Among Young Adults

Substance use is markedly higher among young adults than other age groups. Many young adults try alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs as a “rite of passage”, exploring different substances as they gain independence and form their identity (SAMHSA, 2019). Some young adults turn to substances to cope with life’s stresses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, young adults used alcohol more for coping with depression, rather than social engagement, while marijuana use was primarily motivated by boredom rather than celebration (Graupensperger et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2022). Nationwide, over half (53%) of young adults reported alcohol use in the past 30 days and over one-fifth (22%) reported tobacco product use (NSDUH, 2020). Marijuana was the most commonly used illicit substance in the past 30 days by young adults across the US (21%).

Overall, young adults perceive substance use as less risky than other age groups.

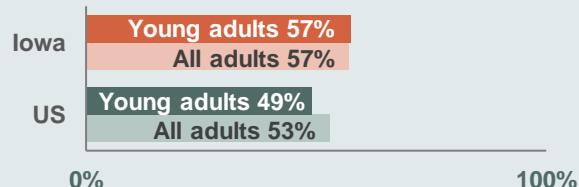
### Alcohol

#### Alcohol Use Among Young Adults in the Past 30 Days

In 2020, 57% of Iowa young adults aged 18 to 24 years reported having at least one drink of alcohol in the past 30 days, significantly greater than the 49% of young adults reporting alcohol use in the past 30 days across all 50 states and the District of Columbia (BRFSS, 2020).

In Iowa, alcohol use among young adults in the past 30 days has decreased slightly from 60% in 2011 to 57% in 2020.

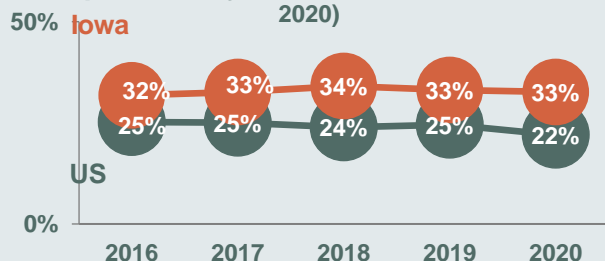
Percentage of young adults, 18-24, reporting alcohol use in the past 30



#### Binge Drinking Among Young Adults in the Past 30 Days

**Binge drinking was higher among Iowa young adults compared to young adults nationwide.**  
Over the past 5 years, one-third (33%) of Iowa young adults, 18-24, reported binge drinking in the past month.

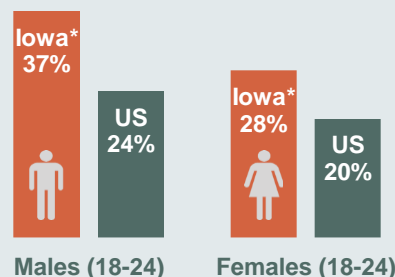
Percentage of young adults, 18-24, reporting binge drinking in the past 30 days, Iowa vs US (BRFSS, 2020)



Binge drinking was higher among young adults compared to other age groups. The prevalence of binge drinking in the past 30 days among Iowa young adults was 33% in 2020, significantly greater than the 22% of US young adults reporting binge drinking (BRFSS, 2020).

The prevalence of binge drinking in 2020 was significantly higher among Iowa young adult males versus US males, 18-24, as well as Iowa young adult females versus US females, 18-24.

Binge Drinking among Young Adults by Gender, Iowa vs US (BRFSS, 2020)



## Perceptions of Alcohol Use and its Consequences Among Iowa Young Adults

Among Iowa young adults, over three-quarters view binge drinking as a risk to both a young adult's physical health and mental health. In a 2019 survey of Iowa young adults, 40% viewed binge drinking as a significant risk, and 38% a moderate risk to physical health (IYAS, 2019). Slightly more (45%) viewed binge drinking as a significant risk to mental health (35% reported it a moderate risk).

Iowa young adults also report negative experiences related to alcohol use. Almost one in ten (9%) reported blacking out, and nearly one in twenty (4%) reported having had friends or family members worry about their drinking (IYAS, 2019).

Nationwide, an estimated 1,519 college students ages 18-24 died from unintentional alcohol-related injuries, including crashes of motor vehicles, in the past year (NIAAA, 2021).

**Table 1. Negative experiences related to alcohol use (IYAS, 2019)**

Forgot where you were or what you did (blacked out)	9%
Had friends or family members worry or complain about your drinking	4%
Got hurt or injured while drinking and required medical attention	1%

## Tobacco

### Current Tobacco Use Among Young Adults

In 2019 and 2020, over one-quarter (28%) of Iowa young adults, 18 to 25, reported use of any tobacco product in the past 30 days compared to 22% of US young adults (NSDUH, 2019 & 2020). Cigarette use in the past 30 days was 21% among Iowa young adults versus 16% of US young adults.

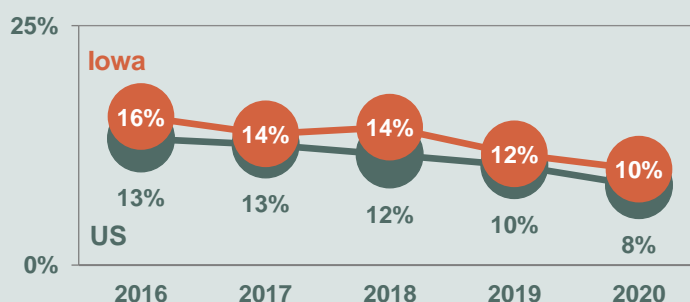
Both in Iowa and nationwide, the percentage of young adults, 18 to 24, who are current smokers (currently smoke every day or some days) has declined five-percentage points in the past five years (BRFSS, 2016-2020).

### E-Cigarette Use Among Young Adults

In 2019, 18% of Iowa young adults, 18 to 24, reported using vape pens, e-cigarettes, JUULs, hookah-pens, or mods in the past 30 days (IYAS, 2019). Of those who used e-cigarettes, 12% of Iowa 18 to 24 year olds reported having made a serious attempt to stop using vaping products in the past 12 months (IYAS, 2019).

Over the past 5 years, the percentage of Iowa young adults who are current smokers has decreased. In 2020, one in ten (10%) young adults, 18 to 24 years old, reported current smoking.

**Percentage of young adults, 18-24, reporting smoking in the past 30 days, Iowa vs US (BRFSS, 2016-2020)**



## Other Substance Use

### Marijuana

Marijuana continues to be the most highly used illicit substance by young adults both in Iowa and the US. On average, 8% of US and Iowa young adults, 18 to 25, reported first use of marijuana use in past year (NSDUH, 2020). Over one-third of young adults reported marijuana use in the past year in Iowa (34%) and the US (35%) (NSDUH, 2020). Approximately one in five young adults in Iowa (21%) and the US (23%) reported marijuana use in the past 30 days (NSDUH, 2020).

In Iowa, marijuana use in the past year was highest among young adults 18-25 years (35%) compared to 11% of youth aged 12 to 17 years or 12% of adults 26 years or older (NSDUH, 2020).

## Opioids / Prescription Pain Reliever

In 2020, 4% of Iowa young adults reported pain reliever misuse\* in the past year similar to 5% of US young adults (NSDUH, 2020). The main reasons for pain reliever misuse included relieving pain (although it wasn't prescribed or they overused it), feeling good or getting high, or to relax to relieve tension (NSDUH, 2020). Less common reasons include help with sleep, help with feelings or emotions, or to experiment.

In 2019, 1% of Iowa young adults reported using prescription opioid pain relievers in the past month when it was not prescribed (IYAS, 2019).

## Cocaine, Methamphetamine, and Heroin

The percentage of young adults who reported cocaine use in the past year was 5% both in Iowa and in the US (NSDUH, 2020). In 2019, 1% of Iowa young adults reported cocaine use in the past 30 days (IYAS, 2019).

In 2020, 0.7% of young adults in Iowa and the US reported methamphetamine use in the past year (NSDUH, 2020). In 2019, 0.2% of Iowa young adults reported using methamphetamine in the past 30 days (IYAS, 2019).

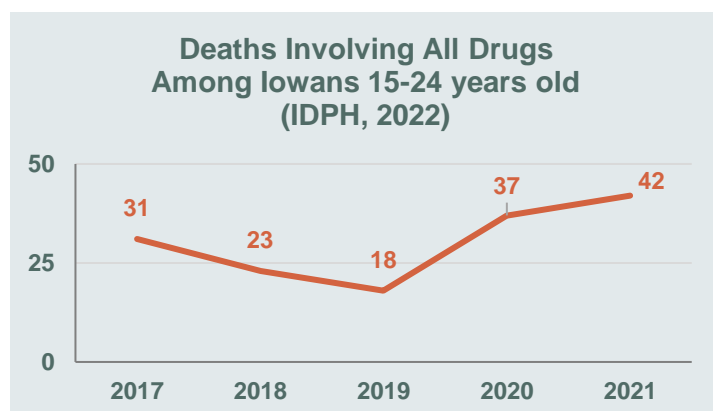
On average, 0.1% of Iowa young adults reported heroin use in the past year (NSDUH, 2020).

Substance Use among Young Adults, 18-25 years (NSDUH, Average Percentages, 2019 & 2020)	Iowa	US
<b>Alcohol</b>		
Alcohol use in the past 30 days	60%*	53%
Binge drinking in the past 30 days	40%*	33%
<b>Tobacco and Nicotine</b>		
Tobacco product use in the past 30 days	28%*	22%
Cigarette use in the past 30 days	21%*	16%
<b>Other Substances</b>		
Marijuana use in the past 30 days	21%	23%
Marijuana use in the past year	34%	35%
First use of marijuana in the past year	8%	8%
Cocaine use in the past year	5%	5%
Prescription pain reliever misuse** in the past year	4%	5%
Methamphetamine use in the past year	0.7%	0.7%
Heroin use in the past year	0.1%	0.2%

\* Significant difference, Iowa versus US,  $p < .05$

\*\* Misuse defined as use in any way not directed by a doctor, including use without a prescription of one's own; use in greater amounts, more often, or longer than told; or use in any other way not directed by a doctor. Does not include over-the-counter drugs.

## Iowa Substance Use Related Admissions & Deaths



In 2020, there were 1,244 substance use admissions per 100,000 Iowans 15 to 24 years old (IDPH, 2022).

Across the last five years, there were an average of 30 deaths per year involving drugs among Iowans 15 to 24 years old (IDPH, 2022). By gender, drug-related deaths in this age group were 72% male and 28% female. By race, 82% of drug-related deaths among 15-24 year olds were White, 13% African American, 2% Asian / Pacific Islander, and 4% another race. By ethnicity, eight percent were Hispanic (91% non-Hispanic).

## Perceptions of Risk to Physical and Mental Health

Risk perception reflects an individual's perceived susceptibility to a threat such as the likelihood of a behavior resulting in a negative consequence such as injury, illness, disease, or death (Ferrer & Klein, 2015). It is useful for understanding health behaviors such as substance use in a population. Young adults who perceive lower risk are more likely to use substances than those who perceive high risk (Lipari & Jean-Francois, 2016). Accurate information about the harm of substance use is a key tenet of health communications and prevention programming.

In 2019, Iowa young adults were asked how much risk once a week substance use posed to a young adult's physical and mental health (IYAS, 2019). **Overall, young adults perceived once a week substance use with equal or greater risk to mental health versus physical health.** The percentage of young adults who viewed **significant or moderate risk** by substance include:

Substance	Significant or moderate risk to physical health	Significant or moderate risk to mental health
Using methamphetamine once a week	96%	96%
Using cocaine once a week	95%	95%
Taking an opioid pain reliever without a prescription	89%	92%
Binge drinking* once a week	78%	78%
Smoking marijuana once a week	39%	48%

\*Defined as 5 or more drinks of alcohol if you are male, or 4 or more drinks if you are female, within a couple of hours.

## Conclusions

Substance use among Iowa young adults is significantly greater than national averages for alcohol, tobacco, and cigarette use in the past 30 days, with similar rates of prescription pain reliever misuse, and marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin use the past year compared to young adults nationwide. Substance use prevention interventions that address risk of harm may help increase the effectiveness of messages and programs.

## References

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For more prevention and treatment resources in Iowa, please visit the IDPH Substance Abuse Prevention website

<https://idph.iowa.gov/Bureau-of-Substance-Abuse/Prevention-Related-Programs>, or  
[YourLifelowa.org](https://YourLifelowa.org)