

California No. 1 in marijuana admissions

Alcohol still most abused; rates up for meth, pot, Rx drugs

By Cheryl Wetzstein

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California, a national leader in medical marijuana use, saw admissions for treatment for marijuana dependence more than double over the past decade, the federal government said in a first-of-its-kind report.

The nationwide increase in marijuana cases — plus evidence that admissions for treatment of methamphetamine and prescription drug abuse skyrocketed between 1998 and 2008 — provides fresh insights into the nation's struggles with substance abuse.

The report by the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration also showed that admissions to detoxification and drug-treatment centers for marijuana dependence nationwide rose 31 percent from 1998 to 2008, a period during which admissions for dependence on alcohol, cocaine and heroin all declined.

New York led the nation with 48,853 reported admissions for pot in 2008. But California provided the most eye-popping statistic — a 117 percent increase in its marijuana admissions rate, growing from 52 admissions per 100,000 population in 1998 to 113 per 100,000 in 2008.

The reasons for this "are many, complex and varied," said Suzi Rupp, spokeswoman for the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. The bottom line is that it's good that so many people are seeking treatment, she said.

"This is a state that has people that use marijuana, both medically and non medically," she said, noting that California law has permitted residents to grow marijuana for personal medicinal use since 1996.

So the issue is "in front of people's eyes," and it may be that more people are seeking treatment or recommending treatment for their loved ones, Ms. Rupp said.

The Golden State recently underwent an election battle over legalizing marijuana, but Proposition 19 was defeated, 53.5 percent to 46.5 percent.

Nevertheless, alcohol remained the most commonly abused substance, accounting for more than 40 percent of the nearly 1.9 million admissions to detoxification centers and other substance-abuse treatment centers reported in 2008.

A "disturbing" trend is the steady increase in admissions for treatment of prescription-drug abuse, said Deborah Trunzo, a top official at the behavioral health statistics center.

Prescription painkillers are opiates and "very addictive," and it's hard to get off these drugs "without a lot of help," Ms. Trunzo said.

The statistical center's report, released last week, shows that in 1998, treatment centers reported a relatively modest 19,870 admissions for prescription-drug abuse. But by 2008, this escalated to 111,251 admissions.

In addition to painkiller abuse, methamphetamine and marijuana abuse each brought increased admissions, says the report, which is based on the Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) collected from states by the statistical center.

Nationally, methamphetamine admissions peaked in 2005, with 171,793 cases, or 70 admissions per 100,000 population.

Meth admissions have since fallen, but the 2008 admissions rate of 49 per 100,000 was still 53 percent higher than in 1998, and use of this highly addictive, disfiguring drug remains common in states in the West and Pacific regions.

Gil Kerlikowske, director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, credited the 2005 Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act for initially pushing down meth abuse.

But unfortunately, meth producers have found ways to circumvent the law and buy large quantities of products with pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient of the drug, Mr. Kerlikowske said this week.

In response, he said, Oregon enacted a law making pseudoephedrine products available only by prescription, and the state's meth problems "have been reduced to single digits." Mississippi passed a similar law this year, and already there are signs it is having the same results, he said.

The statistical center's new report card is based on data from all states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

When alcohol and drug admissions were combined and tracked from 1998 to 2008, the overall trend was unchanged — there were about 770 admissions per 100,000 population in both years.

However, over that time period, admissions fell for alcohol abuse (15 percent), cocaine (23 percent) and heroin (3 percent) and rose for marijuana (31 percent), methamphetamine (53 percent) and prescription drugs (400 percent).

In the Washington metropolitan area, between 1998 and 2008:

- Virginia's admission rate rose from 177 per 100,000 population to 508 per 100,000. Increases were seen in all six categories of alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and prescription-drug abuse.
- Maryland's admission rate fell from 1,346 per 100,000 population to 986 per 100,000. Admissions rose in marijuana, methamphetamine and prescription-drug abuse and declined in the other categories.
- The District and West Virginia were missing several years of data. Their admission rates in 2008, respectively, were 879 per 100,000 and 443 per 100,000.