

LAHS Drug Use

**Exploring Teen Drug Use at LAHS
Using Peer Interviews**

By the Los Alamos Youth Mobilizers:

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Introduction

Los Alamos, New Mexico is a town rich in scientific and cultural history. One would think that in a town such as ours, drug use would not be a growing concern among the youth. However, students at Los Alamos High School, home of the “Hilltoppers”, have shown a pattern of increasing tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use. Results from the 2007-2008 Pride Survey reveal that monthly, 12.1% of students report using tobacco products, 16.7% report using any alcohol, and 13.2% report using any illicit drugs. These rates are, in fact, an increase from previous Pride Survey results. We as Youth Mobilizers were interested in discovering whether students were honest when taking the original surveys. We also wanted to better understand students’ reasoning and motivation behind their substance abuse.

Background

We, the Youth Mobilizers of Los Alamos, are composed of Emily Weeks (17), Josh Dolin (17), Katarina Juarez (16), and Myles Gurule (15). The four of us work together in taking what we see as issues in the community and working to improve them through research and action projects. Youth Mobilizers, a national program, opened a chapter in Los Alamos in 2008. Funded by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board and administrated by the Los Alamos Family YMCA, the Youth Mobilizers were inspired to do this project because of our interest in the Pride Survey, which we have all taken in the past. We were curious as to whether or not students embellish when filling out the surveys, and whether or not they were overrepresented or underrepresented. Because the Pride Survey is a multiple-choice survey, it does not go into the reasoning behind teen drug use. We sought to find reasoning and personal stories pertaining to first time drug-use. We came up with the idea to compose a series of peer-to-peer interviews in which we asked other high school students questions from the pride survey, and other questions pertaining to substance use. We wrote down their exact responses as they gave

them. In order to avoid overwhelming the students during interviews and to make sure that they felt comfortable in giving honest answers, we interviewed each student with only two interviewers. One asked the survey questions and encouraged additional information, and the other wrote down each response, word-for-word. We felt that teenagers would be more comfortable in disclosing personal information to other teenagers and that they would be willing to share more information about their reasoning behind their actions.

Method/Process

We began by looking through Pride Survey data and borrowed questions that we found relevant and interesting. We also met with Georgina Williams and Michelangelo Lobato to get feedback on the survey questions we had come up with. Lobato and Williams asked us to think what we hoped to discover through these peer interviews. We thought about what questions we wanted answered. Some questions reflect our desire to answer what, when, where, and why drugs are used. During the interview process, if we found that a respondent had interesting, relevant information, about the first time they used drugs, then we would add a question to the survey. Because of this continual alteration and the nature of some of our open ended questions, we ended up with four different types of surveys. After we had formed the initial version of our survey, we consulted with Sylvan Argo, a specialist on active research methodology, who gave us advice on doing the survey and compiling the results. She advised that we ask more qualitative questions, and to write down our feelings about interviews immediately after each one. She helped us determine which questions to analyze the most in our report and gave us the idea of looking at respondent's demographic information.

In choosing participants for our surveys, we initially asked students who we knew or suspected to use drugs to meet us in a semi-private environment, such as Starbucks for a conversational interview. Due to our position as their peers, kids were comfortable in disclosing private and sometimes illegal information. After we asked this group, we began to conduct surveys at school

during the lunch hour, asking students in a semi-random fashion if they would like to be surveyed. This broadened our range of participants and led to our interest in positive deviants. A positive deviant is “an individual whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges” (Positive Deviance Initiative). In our case, positive deviants were students whose friends and peers participated in drug culture through usage and partying, but they themselves abstained. This data might have skewed our results slightly, but it was interesting to learn the reasoning behind abstinence in a sea of participation.

Once we had completed our target number of fifty surveys, we organized the written responses for entry into a computer database. We entered raw data including responses and demographics into the database. In addition, we assigned each survey an ID number, then we created numerous charts that broke down each question by demographics or by what drug(s) the respondent used. We used this data to create graphs which described each question.

Findings

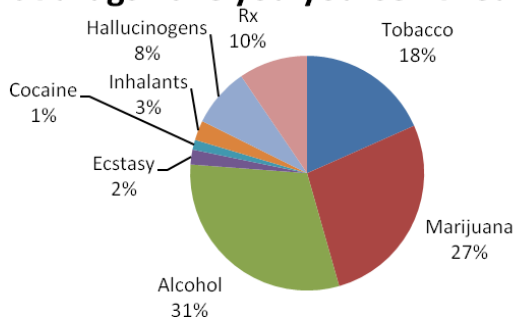
Question 1. What drugs have you yourself tried or used?

Responses: 46/50

The most common drugs used were tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol. Alcohol and marijuana, were by far the most common, at 80 and 90%, while tobacco had 54% use. Hallucinogens and

prescription drugs were surprisingly high, at 24 and 28%, respectively.

What drugs have you yourself tried or used?

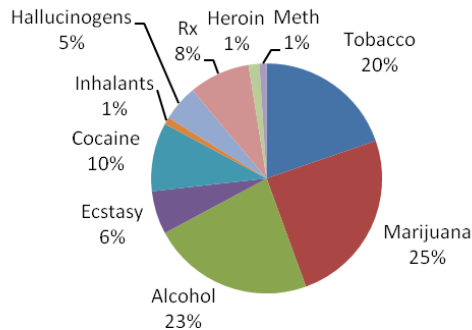


Question 2. What are the most common drugs you see or hear of in Los Alamos?

Responses: 46/50

Again, tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol were the most prevalent, at 78, 98, and 90% of respondents having seen these drugs being used. Ecstasy and cocaine were much higher than drugs used, at 24 and 38%. Hallucinogens and prescription drugs were used often, again, at 20 and 34%.

What are the most common drugs you see?

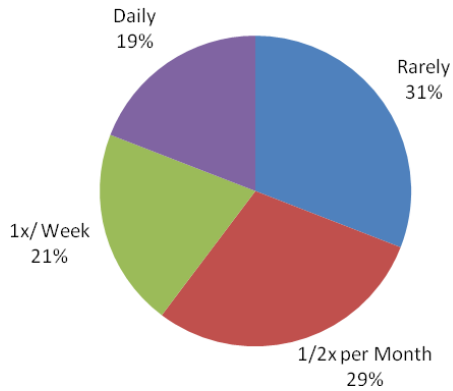


Question 3. How often do you use?

Responses: 46/50

Our data indicates that the majority of drug users do not use drugs often, but instead just ‘try’ drugs, or used to do drugs, but have since quit. Of those who do use, most use occasionally, and less than 1 in 5 respondents use drugs on a daily basis.

How Often Do You Use Drugs?

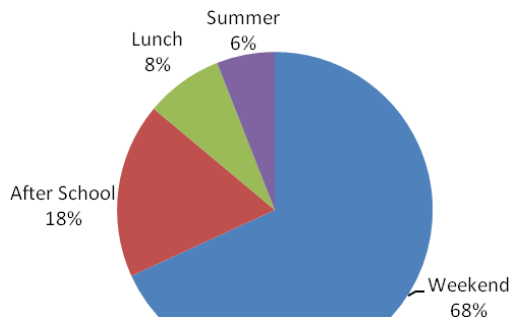


Question 4. When do you most often use the drug?

Responses: 46/50

Most people use drugs during the weekend, rather than after school, at lunch, or during the summer.

When do You Use Drugs?

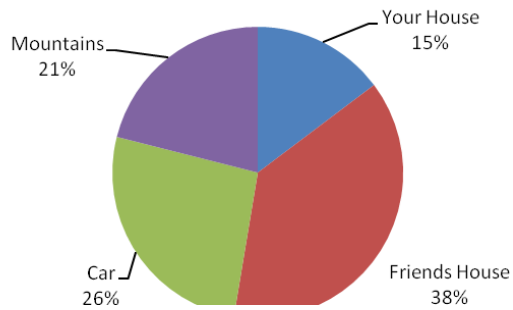


Question 5: Where do you most often use the drug?

Responses: 46/50

The vast majority of respondents use drugs at a friend's house, at almost 40% of respondents. Next is in a car, at about 25%, in the mountains, at 20%, and at their own house, at 15%.

Where Do You Most Often Use Drugs?

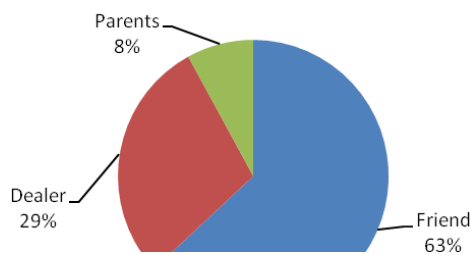


Question 6. How do you obtain the drug?

Responses: 46/50

The majority of respondents obtain drugs from their friends (60%). 30% get them from some sort of drug dealer, and 10% get them from their parents. Those who obtain drugs from their parents say that their parents provide them with a less dangerous drug, usually alcohol, in order to teach them moderation.

How Do You Obtain Drugs?

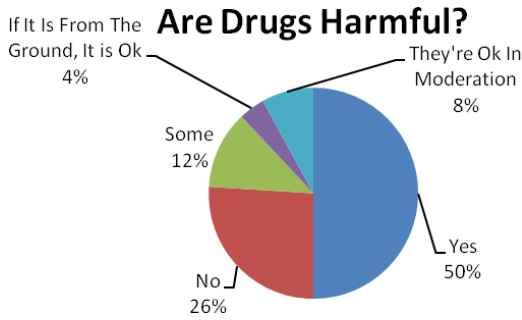


Question 7. Do you feel that drugs are harmful to your health?

Responses: 50/50

While there were more affirmative responses than negative, we were still surprised by how many students believe that drugs are not harmful. Females were more likely to believe that drugs are, in fact,

harmful to one's health, while males were more likely to believe that they are not harmful, or that it depends on the drug.

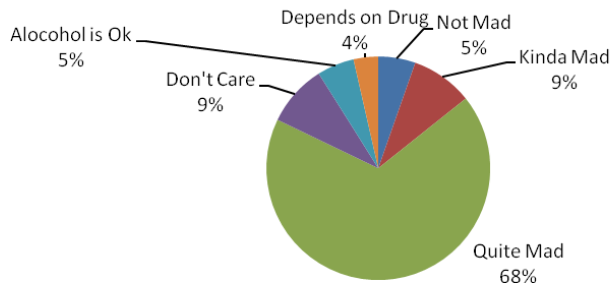


Question 8. How would your parents feel if they found out you 'used'?

Responses: 50/50

While the majority (76%) said that their parents would (unsurprisingly) be 'quite mad', or some variant of that, if they were to find out that their child used drugs. What piqued our curiosity were the other responses. 16% said that their parents would either not be mad, already know, or don't care. 10% said that it would depend on the drug, with 6% of the total saying that their parents would not mind if they used alcohol, but would be upset if they used other drugs. The remaining 5% said that their parents would be mad at first, but would get over it, that their parents would be a little mad, or some variant of that.

How Would Your Parents Feel If They Found Out You Used?

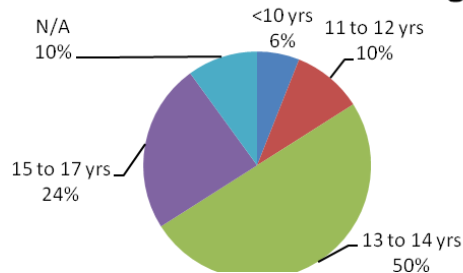


Question 9. At what age did you first use?

Responses: 50/50

Most males and females – 50% – reported first using drugs at ages 13 or 14. However, while for males, there the vast majority began using at 13 or 14, but more females than males began using at other ages.

When Did You First Use Drugs?

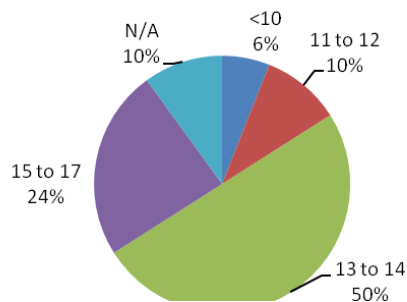


Question 10. Explain your first time. Was it with friends or alone? Was it for recreational purposes? Etc.

Responses: 46/50

Most respondents first used drugs with their friends (28%). Next, 20% first used drugs to ‘experiment’. The next group surprised us—18% of the teens we surveyed initially got drugs from, and often used the drug with either their siblings, or some other relative. The other responses- the drugs were initially provided by parents, the respondent used the drug in the mountains either with their friends or at a party, or was pressure into using the drugs by their peers- were relatively uncommon, at 6, 8, and 6%, respectively.

When Did You First Use Drugs?

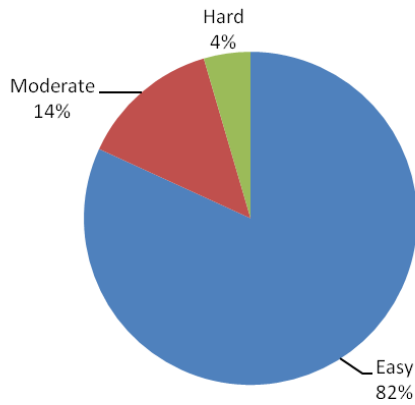


Question 11. How easy is it [the drug] to get?

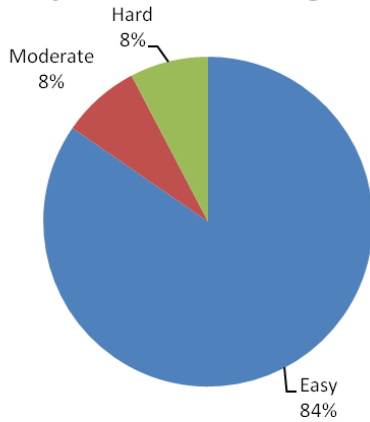
Responses: 48/50

Almost everyone agreed- it is quite easy to obtain drugs. Whether it is alcohol, marijuana, prescriptions, or cocaine, 80% said that it is 'easy' to obtain whatever drug one desires.

How Easy Is it to Get Drugs?- Males



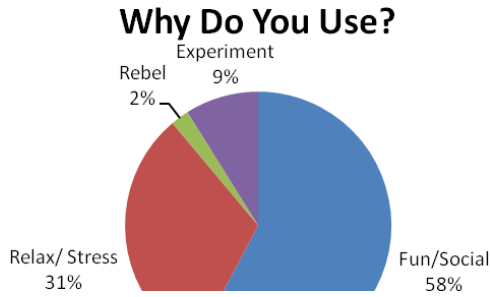
How Easy Is it to Get Drugs?-Females



Question 12. Why do you use drugs?

Responses: 50/50

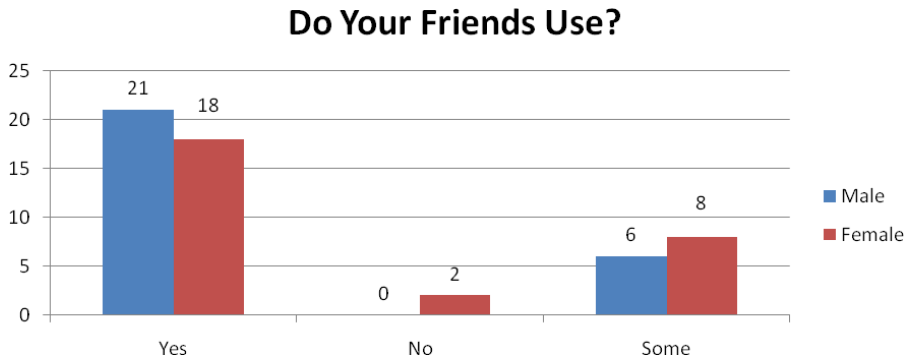
Most teens (52%) said that they use drugs for the social aspect, and because they enjoy it. 28% said that they used drugs to relax, and to cope with stress (primarily stress to perform, either academically, athletically, or otherwise).



Question 13. Do your friends use?

Responses: 50/50

Our data indicates that more of male’s friends use drugs, while females’ friends are more likely to not use drugs. Because most of those surveyed use drugs, it follows logically that males tend to use drugs socially, while females tend to use drugs individually; males tend to use drugs with their friends, or at least because their friends do, but females use drugs independently of their friends.



Question 14. Do your friends know you use drugs?

Responses: 45/50

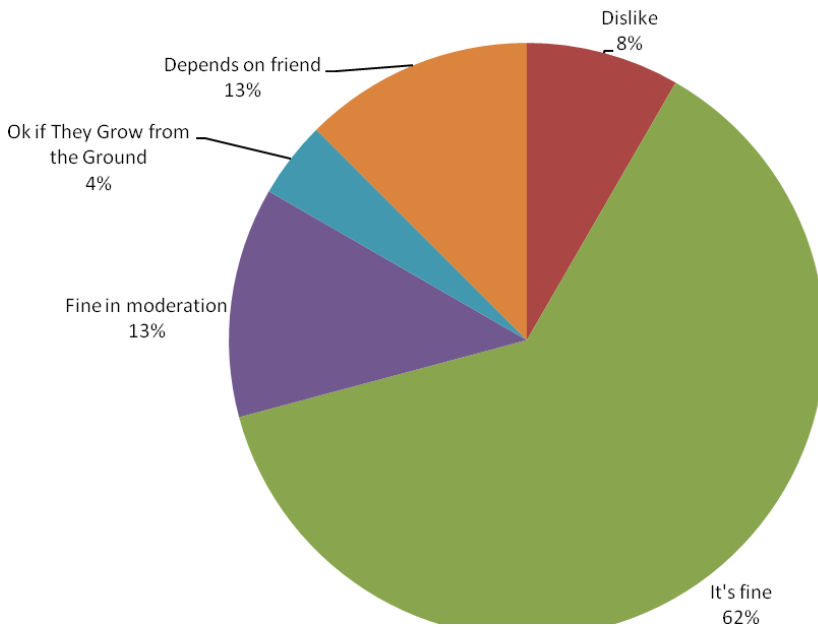
Almost everyone responded 'yes' to this question. Only 1 female replied 'some', out of 45 respondents.

Question 15. How do your friends feel about drugs?

Responses: 48/50

While both the majority of males and females said that their friends felt that drugs were ok, there was a surprising amount other responses. Some of both sexes said that drugs were ok in moderation, but there were more responses from males than from females. More males than females said that their friends disapproved of drugs, but this response was not very prominent in for either gender. 9% of males said that if the drug grew from the ground, it was ok, and a small portion of males, but 20% of females said that it would depend on the friend.

How do Your Friends Feel about Drugs?



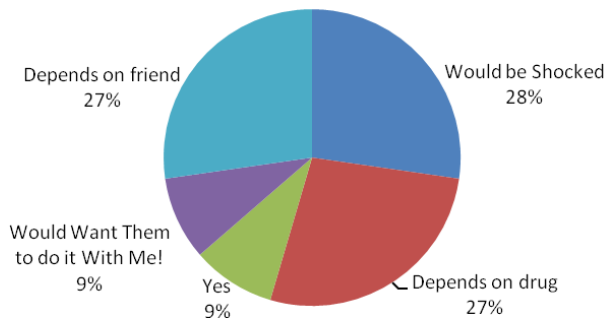
Question 16. Would it upset you if a friend who did not previously use drugs started using?

Responses: 50/50

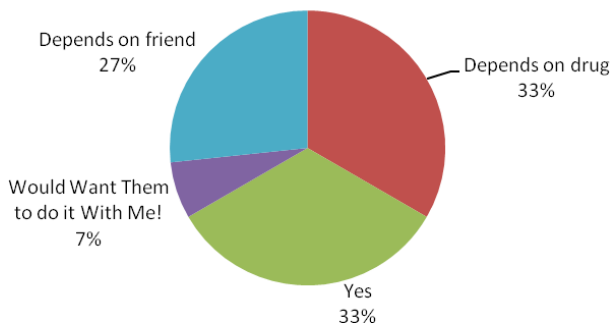
The majority of respondents said that it would respond on either the friend or on the drug. Of those who did not, females were more likely to say simply 'yes', while males were more likely to describe

their response as 'shocked', or a similar adjective. A small percent of respondents said that they would not be upset; they would enjoy using drugs with the friend.

Would You Be Upset if a Friend Began Using?- Male



Would You Be Upset if a Friend Began Using?- Female

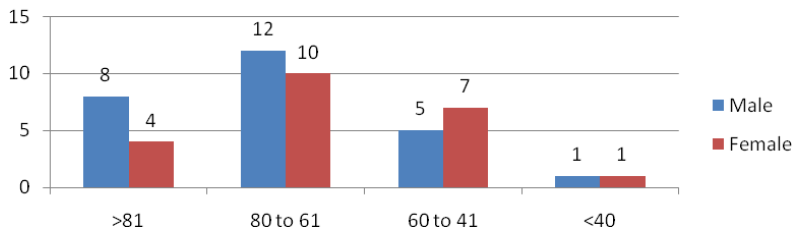


Question 17. Percentage-wise, how many people at your school would you estimate to have tried drugs?

Responses: 48/50

While the majority of responses were in the 61-80 percent range, there were a large number of deviants up to within the 40-60 and greater than 81 percent range. Males were more likely to guess higher, while females were more likely to guess lower, indicating that males tend to be more subject to peer pressure, and believe that almost everyone else they know have tried drugs.

How Many People at Your High School Would You Estimate to Use Drugs?

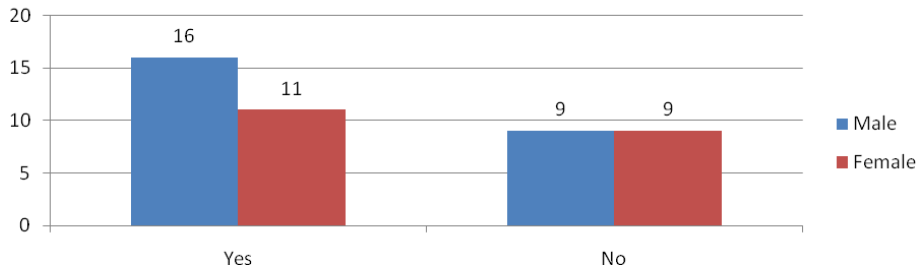


Question 18. Have you ever attended class while under the influence of any drug?

Responses: 45/50

60% responded 'yes', while 40% responded 'no'. Males were slightly more likely to respond affirmatively, with the same amount of males as females answering 'no', and more males answering 'yes'.

Have You Attended Class While Under The Influence?

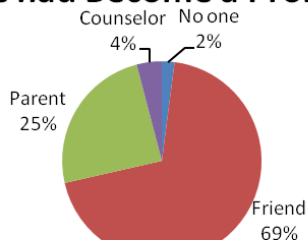


Question 19. If you felt that your drug use had become a problem, and you wanted to discuss it with someone, who would you talk to?

Responses: 49/50

The vast majority of respondents said that they would talk to friends (70%), and then parents (25%), and finally to counselors (5%). This shows that students tend to distrust counselors, whether it is those provided by the school, or otherwise. Students may distrust counselors because they don't know them, because they are adults, for fear of judgment, or because it is simply easier to talk to someone you see on an everyday basis.

Who Would You Talk to If You Felt Your Drug Use had Become a Problem?

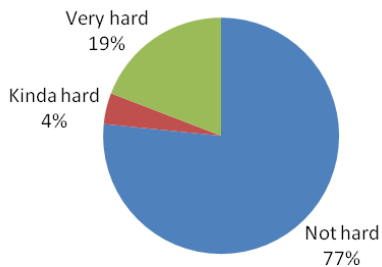


Question 20. How hard would it be to find someone to talk to?

Responses: 47/50

77% of respondents said that it would be relatively easy to talk to, while 19% said it would be quite difficult, and only 4% said that it would be somewhere in between easy and hard.

How Hard Would It be to Talk to that Person?



Conclusion

Through conducting this drug use survey, we were able to discover reasons why students began using different drugs. By using peer interviews, we could go more into depth as to the reasons for drug use, at what age they first started, situational factors, and how accessible they believed drugs to be in Los Alamos. We found that alcohol is the most commonly abused substance, followed by marijuana. Not only was marijuana the second most abused, but it was also found to be the most common drug seen and heard of. We also found that kids most often obtained drugs through close friends rather than through drug dealers or siblings. When asked if they believe drugs are harmful to one's health, the majority agreed that they are harmful. While looking at differences in gender, we found no obvious difference in drug use other than the age they had first used drugs. Males tended to start at an earlier age than females. Also, when asked to estimate the percentage of students who have tried drugs in LAHS, males tended to give a larger percentage estimate than females. Overall, by conducting these personal interviews, we were able to understand reasons why students were using drugs at such early ages and even where and at what times they tended to use the drugs. The students interviewed were able to open up with us to share their personal experiences that would have otherwise not have been able to be recorded on a traditional survey. For example, one respondent said that the drug problem is getting worse with younger children, and that moderation should be taught. Another student said that people begin using drugs for fun, but it starts to become a habit, and that people use drugs mostly to cope with stress from work and tests. One student did not do drugs because he was a member of a music movement called 'Straightedge' that is committed to not using drugs, and he abstains for power in himself, and that way he has something to believe in. Another uses drugs during the summer because there are no sports or school to worry about, and drug use won't affect his work. Another student first used drugs when her friend was using, and she was pressured to do it. She said that drug use is a hidden problem; that it is accentuated by the amount of money that students have available to them, and the

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access they have to drugs. Two different boys both first used at 8 years of age, with one using marijuana, and one using tobacco. A very common belief among respondents was that drugs tend to be acceptable to use if grown from the ground, and are worse for one's health if they contain artificial chemicals. Although student's reasoning for drug use varies, all indicators suggest a trend toward earlier drug use, and easier access to drugs.

After reviewing our findings, we wondered what we could do to decrease rates of drug and alcohol abuse. We decided that our efforts should be directed to younger students, as our data indicates that most people began using drugs at 13 or 14 (see question 9). We were inspired to create an educational presentation to give to sixth grade students, informing them of the potentially peer-pressuring situations they could soon face. This presentation, which we called "Time With a Topper" covered topics including peer-pressure, drugs, alcohol, cyber-bullying, and the transition to the middle school, with support from Principal Gerry Washburn, on May 10, 2009. We gave our presentation at Mountain Elementary School and included a question and answer portion to thoroughly inform the students about the topics, tell them our own personal stories, and educate them in how to properly handle such situations. The presentation was well-received by students, and the teachers commented on how useful they found it to be. The students had enough questions for our single hour presentation to potentially fill one-and-a-half to two hours.

Through working on this project, we hope to inform adults about teen drug use in Los Alamos. As adults are becoming aware of what drugs teens use, where they obtain those drugs, and other issues, adults will be better able to target teen drug use.