

Rise in Synthetic Marijuana Use by Teens an Issue Locally and Nationally

A form of synthetic marijuana, commonly referred to as “Spice” or “K2”, began appearing across the U.S. in 2008, and its popularity grew over the past few years mainly because it could be sold legally and not be detected in urinalysis drug tests. However, its legality has been temporarily suspended after the DEA took emergency action in late 2011 by giving five synthetic cannabinoids Schedule 1 status under the Controlled Substances Act (through August 2012), making it illegal to sell, buy, or possess it. While a urinalysis test was recently developed to detect Spice, the test remains cost prohibitive for many jurisdictions to include in their regular drug testing panel. Unfortunately, Spice remains available, particularly through black market Internet sites, indicating a need for continued education and prevention¹. As awareness about synthetic marijuana broadened across the U.S., the Monitoring the Future survey added questions in 2011 that asked high school seniors about their experience using these drugs, with nearly 1 in 9 (11%) reporting they had used them in the past year (not shown)².

Locally, SANDAG added new questions about Spice to their 2011 Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) interview conducted in Juvenile Hall with recently arrested youth. As Table 1 shows, these interviews revealed that one in every two juvenile arrestees had ever tried Spice, with 41 percent having done so in the past year and 18 percent having used it as recently as three days prior to their arrest. The youth who had ever tried Spice did so for the first time on average at age 15.17 ($SD=1.30$, range 11 to 18 years) (not shown).

Table 1

MORE THAN HALF OF LOCAL JUVENILE ARRESTEES EVER TRIED SPICE	
Ever tried Spice	52%
Used Spice in last year	41%
Used Spice in last 3 days	18%
TOTAL	124

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included

SOURCE: Substance Abuse Monitoring Survey, 2011

Through the SAM project, SANDAG will continue to monitor trends in arrestees’ use of Spice to determine if recent federal controls on its availability and developing drug screens have an effect on its use among this population. In June 2012, SANDAG will release its SAM bulletin summarizing 2011 data from interviews with juvenile arrestees. To access the SAM bulletin and other SANDAG publications, go to www.sandag.org/cj. For more information about Spice, visit the National Institute of Drug Abuse Web site at www.drugabuse.gov.

¹ National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2011). InfoFacts: Spice. Available [on-line] at www.drugabuse.gov.

² Johnston, L.D., O’Malley, P., Bachman, J.G., and Schulenberg, J.E. (2011). *Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2011*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan.