

# The Hidden POPULATION

BY JOY BAUM

## ARE YOU AN ADULT OVER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN? ARE YOU HAPPY IN YOUR LIFE? DO YOU OCCASIONALLY USE ILLICIT DRUGS?

These are questions for which Dr. Tom Nicholson, a professor in the Public Health Department at Western Kentucky University, wants answers. Seven years ago, he and his colleagues, Dr. John White, from Western, and Dr. David Duncan, from Brown University, began researching adults who occasionally use illicit drugs. The measurement tool they have used is an Internet survey called DRUGNET, which is currently off-line.

After doing research in this field for about twenty years, Nicholson became increasingly frustrated about the lack of literature and data about adult users who didn't end up in jail or rehabilitation — in other words, people who were users, but not abusers.

"We know a lot about substance abusers and people in rehabilitation programs, but we don't know as much about adults who use occasionally, because they are a hidden population. Many of the drugs they use are illegal, and people can get into trouble with their jobs and their families, or go to prison," he said.

DRUGNET was devised as a multiple item format survey posted on-line. After answering basic demographic and mental well-being questions, respondents were questioned about their use of alcohol, cocaine, depressants, hallucinogens, marijuana, opiates, and amphetamines.

The research group used on-line, targeted advertising, such as e-mail, to solicit people to take the survey. Dr. Nicholson and his colleagues were also interviewed by Wired magazine. After Wired ran the story in 1997, the number of people taking the survey began to increase.

"These people basically hide themselves, so we take advantage of the Internet. People can take our survey, on-line, anonymously in their homes, and there is no way for us to find out who they are when their survey comes back to us. All forms of identification are stripped off, and we are left with a random number assigned by the computer. It's a way for people to be honest and provide information."

The respondents also took the General Well Being Schedule developed by the National Center for Health Statistics. The test is a measure of overall mental well-being. "This is what the National Center for Health Statistics has used as a measure of normal, functioning adults. The DRUGNET respondents scored similarly to the national sample. The survey also screened for problematic behavior using similar questions that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders uses," Nicholson explained.

"The group itself is what we wanted. Well over ninety percent of the people who took our survey reported that they have a college degree. The majority of them reported that they have jobs or are in college. We're not targeting



Dr. Tom Nicholson

people in prisons or treatment centers. The typical respondent reported that he or she was well-educated, employed full time, and a participant in recreational and community activities," Nicholson said.

Nicholson and his colleagues have gathered the largest data set of this type to date. The U.S. Department of Justice website has data on Youth, General Population, and Workforce (employed) users from the National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health, but no broad, detailed, self-defined data on casual illicit drug users.

The initial survey concluded in the fall of 2002 after a little more than 2,000 responses, but a new survey is being revised to include more essay questions, allowing people to give more detailed responses. It should go back on-line in 2006. Nicholson and his colleagues are hoping for even more responses to add to the already collected data.

"Our goal is descriptive data for this population's behavior. The responses we got showed that their drug-taking behavior appeared to be well controlled, at mild to moderate levels in both frequency of use and the degree of intoxication. This should have implications for drug policy in this country. Right now we have a drug policy based on the assumption that drugs have to be eliminated altogether. This has not been effective. We are finding out information that helps improve harm reduction strategies. We have over two million people in this country in prisons or jails, and many are there for possession of small amounts of illicit substances. Some states are changing now, and sending more people to treatment as opposed to prison. We also need to rethink the way we do drug education," Nicholson said.

Dr. Nicholson and his colleagues published their findings in several scholarly journals. The initial analyses

were published in the Journal of Psychoactive Drugs in 1999. Other articles were published in the Journal of Substance Use in 2002, the American Journal of Health Behavior in 2003 and Psychological Reports in 2003.

Many of Dr. Nicholson's graduate students have done their theses using this data set. All have been presented nationally, and one was published in a scholarly journal. One of the students, a physician from India, got his master's degree in public health, his doctorate in epidemiology, and is now doing a medical residency program. His presentation and a publication using this data set helped get him into a Ph.D. program.

"This is a wonderful tool for teaching students how to do data analysis. It also bridges the gap between students and teachers when teachers are doing what they are teaching," Dr. Nicholson said.

Another one of his graduate students, Dr. Nivedita Seerpi, used the study for her master's thesis. Her study was presented at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association. Seerpi now works as an epidemiologist, and says that the research really helped her. "Dr. Nicholson's personal interest and level of commitment to the research was the biggest asset," Seerpi said. "He is very knowledgeable and was always available for questions, and always kept me focused."

Nicholson has always been interested in improving community health. "I have personal and professional motives for this type of research," he said. "A lot of my aunts and uncles died because of tobacco or alcohol abuse. I was born in a poor part of New York City. I saw what tobacco and alcohol abuse did to my family."

With the determination to be different from previous generations of his family, he graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor of science

in community health from SUNY at Brockport, and continued his education with a master's of public health from the University of Texas, and a doctorate in Community Health from Southern Illinois University. In 2002, he was awarded the WKU College of Health and Human Services Faculty Award for Research and Creativity.

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In addition to teaching, Nicholson's involvement with the community health field extends nationally. He is a member of the Board of Directors for the National Association for Public Health Policy and has served on various committees for the American Public Health Association. His years of service dedicated to improving community health include a long list of national presentations and involvement with various health related groups, although drug education has always stayed near to his heart.

"I think there has got to be a way to prevent substance abuse," he said. "There has to be a way for people to live with the inevitable availability of psychoactive drugs."



photo by Hannah Gieghorn