Who's Got the Acid?

These days, almost nobody.

By Ryan Grim

Researchers at the University of Michigan started tracking the illicit drug habits of America's high-schoolers in 1975. Despite the inherent difficulty of conducting such surveys—kids are excellent liars and exaggerators—the Michigan team has established "Monitoring the Future" as the most reliable guide to drug-use trends in the United States.

MTF has documented the rise and decline of many drugs, but lead researcher Dr. Lloyd Johnston says the group has never seen such a dramatic drop in the use of an established illicit drug as they're seeing now with LSD. In both the 2000 and 2001 surveys, 6.6 percent of high-school seniors reported that they'd used LSD in the previous year. In 2002, the figure dropped to 3.5 percent. And in the most recent survey, from 2003, only 1.9 percent of high-school seniors claim to have dropped acid. (The standard error for this LSD survey is 0.25 percentage points.)

Evidence of acid's decline can be found practically everywhere you look: in the number of emergency room mentions of the drug; in an ongoing federal survey of drug use; in a huge drop in federal arrests; and in anecdotal reports from the field that the once ubiquitous psychedelic is exceedingly difficult to score. In major cities and college towns where LSD was once plentiful, it can't be had at all.

University of Maryland professor Peter Reuter, a leading drug-policy expert, is flabbergasted by the new LSD data.

"We have literally never seen anything like this," Reuter says. "This isn't a trend. This is an event."

Obviously, the LSD market isn't as easy to understand as, say, the coffee bean market because criminal sanctions against LSD's manufacture, sale, possession, and use drive most of the useful data underground. But while our knowledge of the LSD market may be imperfect, a variety of available yardsticks, such as the MTF survey, give us some sense of its workings.

For instance, data from the federal Drug Abuse Warning Network, which charts emergency room data in 21 major cities, second MTF's LSD surveys. DAWN, run by the Department of Health and Human Services, isn't a scientific survey: It merely records the "mentions" of drugs by patients entering emergency rooms. (For instance, if you visited the ER with a broken finger, and they asked if you were on drugs, and you said, "Yes, LSD," you'd go down as an LSD mention, even if you were fibbing. If you answered, "Yes, LSD and pot," they'd record both drug mentions.) But DAWN data is still a good rough measure of drug use. Between 1995 and 2000, LSD mentions remained relatively stable, hovering around 2,500 during each six-month period. But in the second half of 2001, DAWN's LSD mentions dropped below 1,000 for the first time. In the next six-month period, mentions fell below 500.

DAWN Project Director Dr. Judy Ball says what's unique about the LSD findings is that they show a consistent decline in every metropolitan area measured, not just common regional fluctuations.

Another HHS initiative started surveying LSD use in the general population in 1965. It now does business as the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, and the most recent results register a decline among 18- to 25-year-olds who say they have ever used the drug (16.6 percent to 15.9 percent). In the 12 to 17 range, use fell from 3.3 percent to 2.7 percent. NSDUH changed its methodology for the most recent survey in such a way that had LSD use stayed *constant*, the survey should have shown an uptick in use. This means the decline in LSD use is greater than the NSDUH numbers reflect.

Nobody collects national arrest data for LSD cases, but federal arrests for LSD trafficking and possession have tumbled in recent years. The Drug Enforcement Administration recorded 203 arrests in FY2000, 95 in FY2001, 41 in FY2002, and 19 in FY2003. In the first quarter of 2004, the feds have arrested only three people on LSD charges. In the LSD haven of San Francisco, the DEA recorded 20 arrests in 2000 versus zero in 2002, according to DEA Special Agent Richard Meyer of the agency's San Francisco office.

One possible explanation for the decline could be changed attitudes about LSD. But MTF's Johnston says a shift in drug habits is "generally explainable by the disapproval or risk data, but in this case we didn't have that." Indeed, the perceived risk and disapproval rates for LSD among the MTF population have dropped steadily since 1975.

So what explains the LSD drought? The best explanation is a bust, a really big bust. The DEA claims it reduced the LSD supply by "95 percent" with two arrests in rural Kansas in November 2000. Clyde Apperson and William Leonard Pickard were charged with and eventually convicted of possession and conspiracy to distribute LSD. According to court testimony, the DEA seized the largest operable LSD laboratory in agency history, as well as 91 pounds of LSD and precursor compounds for the potential manufacture of nearly 27 pounds more. If you define a dose of LSD as 100 micrograms, Apperson and Pickard had around 400 million hits in stock. At the more common dosage level of 20 micrograms, the two were sitting on 2 billion hits. Apperson got 30 years in prison, and Pickard got two life sentences. The Kansas bust marked the third time in four years that the DEA had arrested Apperson and Pickard on LSD lab charges.

The LSD market took an earlier blow in 1995, when Grateful Dead frontman Jerry Garcia died and the band stopped touring. For 30 years, Dead tours were essential in keeping many LSD users and dealers connected, a correlation confirmed by the DEA in a divisional field assessment from the mid-'90s. The spring following Garcia's death (the season the MTF surveys are administered), annual LSD use among 12th-graders peaked at 8.8 percent and began their slide. Phish picked up part of the Dead's fan base—and presumably vestiges of the LSD delivery system. At the end of 2000, Phish stopped touring as well, and perhaps not coincidentally, the MTF numbers for LSD began to plummet.

Where have all the acid-eaters gone? MTF records a stable interest in "hallucinogens other than LSD"—the hallucinogen usually being psychoactive mushrooms—since the 2000 decline of acid. DAWN shows the same trend under the "miscellaneous hallucinogens" category. (Over the same period, use of both ecstasy and methamphetamine dropped in the MTF survey.) In other words, the decline in LSD use doesn't look like a demand-side phenomena: The cultural hunger for a substance that lets you hold affordable conversations with God, watch walls melt, breathe colors, and explore your psyche remains unsated.

When declining supply intersects with unchanged demand, an increase in price usually occurs—this seems to be the case with LSD. While the DEA does not release price information for LSD, many acid aficionados say its once-steady price of $5 a hit now ranges as high as $20, and that's when the drug is available. Another market change: In 1995, one could easily purchase several sheets of 100 hits at selected rock concerts, but buying more than 10 doses at a time today is difficult.

Historically, illicit LSD production has been dominated by just a few operators, so if Apperson and Pickard were the United States' major LSD suppliers, taking them down may well have caused this major disruption. They won't be easily replaced. Synthesizing LSD is much more difficult than brewing methamphetamine, PCP, or even ecstasy. Also, LSD manufacture demands precision chemistry and difficult-to-obtain precursor chemicals that these other drugs don't.

How permanent is the acid drought? The history of drug prohibition indicates that the government can upset supply and demand at the margins. It can drive one drug into scarcity only to see users substitute it with another. But it never eliminates the market

for drugs altogether. As the drug war enters its second century, LSD appears to be in retreat. But never bet against a comeback.