

# Innovation and Excellence in Survey Research



For decades, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health has been integral to improving the lives of those struggling with substance abuse and mental illness. RTI International has conducted the survey since 1988, demonstrating a proven capability to provide expertise in substance abuse and mental health epidemiology. RTI collects confidential data on sensitive topics, employs rigorous sampling and weighting techniques, supports and refines complex technological systems and programs, and reports and disseminates results in a timely manner, while continuously improving processes and maximizing efficiency.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is the federal government's primary source of national data on the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit substances and related mental health issues. The survey provides annual national and state-level prevalence estimates and also addresses related topics, such as mental health, substance dependence and abuse, and the need for treatment.

RTI's responsibilities on NSDUH include sample selection and weighting, questionnaire development and testing, data collection, data processing, small area estimation, methodological investigations, preparation of public use data files, analysis, and reporting.

RTI's NSDUH staff are dedicated to superior client satisfaction and continually achieve an annual government evaluation rating averaging 99% or above.

## RTI's Approach

Using census data, RTI statisticians select areas in each state and the District of Columbia. The design enables reporting of national estimates, plus state and substate estimates. Each year, almost 700 staff visit the selected areas to screen more than 140,000 households to determine their eligibility for the study and then conduct approximately 70,000 interviews. Interviewers use a handheld computer for eligibility screenings and a laptop to administer computer-assisted interviews. Daily, interviewers transmit data securely to RTI. Data are processed and subjected to a wide variety of statistical processes, including data consistency checks, imputation, weighting, and disclosure analysis. NSDUH results provide policy makers, program planners, and researchers with information on substance use and mental health, which they use to design programs and target resources for treatment and prevention.



## Highlights and Innovations

RTI continues to successfully manage this massive data collection effort:

- NSDUH field managers excel in timely communications, working to efficiently and uniformly direct all data collection activities.
- Experienced interviewers and supervisors located throughout the nation resolve challenges that could otherwise dampen response rates, such as accommodating busy people, reassuring sample members fearful of strangers or of the government, overcoming language barriers, and obtaining access to households in limited-access locations.
- Extensive logistical systems support these staff, such as rapid materials resupply, technical support 7 days a week, and ongoing interviewer training.
- Specific steps to maximize quality are embedded in every stage of data collection and processing. For example, RTI designed an early data review process that analyzes frequencies, timing data, cross tabulations, “other, specify” responses, and data summaries to identify potentially problematic questions within the NSDUH questionnaire early in the data collection period.
- RTI systems are designed to be flexible so we can respond quickly to special requests and implement numerous NSDUH pilot studies and field tests.
- Creative RTI staff from various disciplines work together to use technology proactively to meet client needs. Significant innovations include the following:
  - **iLearning** is a multimedia, independent learning application interviewers use to complete training courses, thus enhancing convenience and cost savings
  - A **comprehensive intranet Web site** streamlines editing, coding, problem resolution, variable definition, and data lookup for efficient data processing management that maximizes data quality
  - A **detailed Web-based case management system** uses paradata to inform adaptive design techniques that enable timely and cost-effective management of fieldwork

- **State-of-the-art RTI-developed small area estimation methods** produce high-quality state and substate drug use estimates at low cost
- **Equipment-tracking systems** maintain information on the users and location of all computer equipment while quickly providing current details on equipment inventory, shipment requests, and problem logs to allow for timely problem resolution.

## Results

NSDUH findings are released to the public approximately 8 months after data collection ends. In addition to a national report, RTI produces state reports and numerous short reports annually that highlight key areas of interest, from topics such as depression and alcohol use among teens to nonmedical use of prescription drugs among older persons. NSDUH reports are available online at <http://oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh.htm>.

### For more information about NSDUH, contact or visit

David Cunningham, Associate Project Director  
National Survey on Drug Use and Health  
Phone: 919.485.2612  
Email: [dbc@rti.org](mailto:dbc@rti.org)

<https://nsduhweb.rti.org>  
<http://oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh.htm>

### For more information about RTI's capabilities in survey research, contact

Craig Hill, Vice President  
Survey Research Division  
Phone: 919.541.6327  
E-mail: [chill@rti.org](mailto:chill@rti.org)

Allen Duffer, Director  
Business and Proposal Development  
Phone: 919.541.7356  
E-mail: [aduffer@rti.org](mailto:aduffer@rti.org)

RTI International  
3040 Cornwallis Road, PO Box 12194  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194 USA

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