Making headlines this week, alcohol-related arrests on college campuses in the U.S. surged 24.3 percent in 1998, the largest jump in seven years, according to a survey by the Harvard School of Public Health found that 22.7 percent of the college student population reported frequent binge drinking in 1999, up from 19.8 percent in 1993 and 20.9 percent in 1997. The survey included 14,000 students at 119 colleges (Dizon, 2000). And it is not just the older youth who are turning to booze. Alcohol is the drug of choice among high school and middle school students as well. And while one-third of high school students say they have binged on alcohol in the past month, a poll found that only 3 percent of high school students' parents think their teens have done so (Falco, 2000).

Many parents, aware of the dangers of alcohol abuse, willingly allow their children to attend “raves” — large nonalcoholic parties that can be held anywhere — in warehouses, clubs, and even outdoors. But in a recent expose by an NBC News magazine show, “Dateline”, underage children were invited to buy illegal drugs several times within minutes of entering the rave event. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, an annual survey conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, estimates the prevalence of illicit drug use in the United States. The survey published in 1999 found that over 16% of young adults aged 18 to 25 were current users of illicit drugs and nearly one in 10 children aged 12 to 17 were current users of illicit drugs. In 1997 alone, there were 708,000 new inhalant users and 65% of these were between the ages of 12 and 17 (MSNBC News, 2000).

There are, of course, several explanations for addiction. Postulating genetic mechanisms for addictive behaviors is one of the favored explanations. Sons of alcoholic fathers are three to four times more likely to abuse alcohol and a predisposition to abuse one drug applies to almost all other drugs. Other addiction theorists hypothesize that there is something wrong with the brain chemistry of people who abuse drugs and alcohol, perhaps deficiencies in the brain reward system. Many people intuitively recognize the “self-medication” aspects of substance abuse, when addicts use various drugs alone or in combination, to produce a specific mind- or mood-altering effect, particularly under stress.

But what rarely appears in the popular press as a significant causative factor in the evolution of substance abuse disorders is the intimate connection between alcohol and drug use and post-traumatic stress disorder. War trauma has been associated with very high rates of substance abuse with 60%-80% having concurrent diagnoses of alcohol abuse or drug abuse or dependency. Vietnam veterans with higher levels of war zone stress were more likely to exhibit chemical abuse or dependency than those with lower levels of stress, indicating that the neurobiological alterations associated with PTSD may make affected individuals more susceptible to substance abuse (Friedman, 1990). Battered women are 15 times more likely to abuse alcohol (Salasin & Rich, 1993). Briere reported that 27% of adult sexual abuse victims had a history of alcohol abuse and 21% a history of drug abuse, while Herman found that 35% of female incest victims abused drugs and alcohol (Green, 1993). The numbers rose to 80% in a group of female incest survivors who had been inpatients (Green, 1993). Substance problems have been shown to increase over time in several studies of disaster victims (Grace et al, 1993). Of a sample of 2300 police officers, 23% reported drinking problems and another 10% said they abused other drugs (Mitchell & Dyregrov, 1993). In a metaanalysis of the sequelae of civilian trauma, victims of noncombat trauma were significantly more likely to have a number of psychiatric disorders including substance abuse (Brown et al, 2000).

It is the impact of childhood abuse and neglect that is the most disturbing and may have a great deal to do with the rising incidence of substance abuse among the adolescent population. Approximately 50%-60% of women and 20% of men in chemical dependency recovery programs report having been victims of childhood sexual abuse. Approximately 69% of women and 80% of men in such programs report being victims of childhood physical abuse (Matsakas, 1994). Estimates of the rate of PTSD among substance abusers varies between 12% and 34%, while for female substance abusers, the co-occurrence rate is 2-3 times as high (Najavits, 1998). In a study of 50 patients in an inpatient chemical withdrawal unit and 50 patients assessed for an outpatient chemical dependency program, 39% had a dissociative disorder and 43 reported childhood abuse (Ross et al, 1992). In another


Dr. Sandra L. Bloom is Executive Director of the Sanctuary Programs, at Horsham Clinic, Ambler PA and Hampton Behavioral Health Center, Rancocas, NJ. She is Associate Medical Director of Horsham Clinic.