

Legalization of Marijuana and Youth Use of Marijuana

The legalization of medical marijuana does not seem to increase marijuana use among youths, a recent study by scientists at the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, California found. Instead, community social norms that are related to support for legalization of medical marijuana, rather than legalization per se, may affect use by youths. The study, carried out using data from Montana, examined the relationship between the number of adults in a county who have legal access to medical marijuana and the number of young people who use marijuana. The results show that living in a county with more medical marijuana users was *not* related to lifetime or 30-day marijuana use among 8th, 10th and 12th graders. However, level of voter approval of medical marijuana was positively related to lifetime and 30-day use among teens.

Marijuana use has been on the rise in the US and daily marijuana use is at a 30-year high among high school seniors, as indicated by the annual Monitoring the Future survey. Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug among US teens with 13% of 8th graders, 29% of 10th graders and 36% of 12th graders having used it in the past year. Marijuana is easily accessible to youths with 38% of 8th graders, 68% of 10th graders and 82% of 12th graders reporting that it is fairly easy or very easy to get marijuana.

The current study examined whether having a greater number of legal users of medical marijuana affects teen use. Most research suggests that easy availability of a substance (for example, alcohol or tobacco) increases use among teens – even if they are legally prohibited from using the substance. This study, however, did not find that result.

The survey data regarding teen use and attitudes were from the 2010 Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) Community Student Survey, which is conducted by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. This voluntary and anonymous survey is administered every other year to students in grades 8, 10 and 12. In 2010, data were collected using self-administered surveys given by teachers and other school staff in 73.5% of eligible Montana schools. More than 17,000 students were surveyed.

A third of youths surveyed reported that they had used marijuana at some point in their lifetime. More than half of these users (54.3%) reported having used marijuana in the past 30 days. On average, youth users of marijuana were 13.8 years old the first time they smoked marijuana. On average, perceived access to marijuana was rated as “somewhat easy” by all respondents and “easy” by marijuana users. Youths from counties with more medical marijuana users perceived that marijuana was easier to obtain than did youths from counties with fewer medical marijuana users.

Medical marijuana was legalized in Montana through a ballot initiative in 2004. In 2011, the number of medical marijuana cards per 1,000 population ranged from 2.6 to 67.3 cards per county with a mean of 25.1. Percent of yes votes for the legalization of medical marijuana in the general election in 2004 ranged from 36.5% to 73.2% across counties with a mean of 55.9%.

The study found that youths who lived in a county with a higher proportion of legal medical marijuana users were no more likely to use marijuana than youths in counties with few legal users. However, youths who lived in counties with higher levels of voter approval for legalization of medical marijuana were more likely to have used marijuana. The findings of this study suggest that it may be the normative environment more than the number of legal medical marijuana users *per se* in a community that is related to marijuana use among youths. The percentage of votes in favor of legalization of medical marijuana may represent not only greater acceptance of medical marijuana, but more tolerant attitudes towards marijuana use in general.

Lead author Dr. Bettina Friese stated, “These findings highlight the importance of the normative environment in which teens live. It is not just the presence of a substance in the community that affects the behavior of teens but the attitudes and the culture around them. Votes for the legalization of medical marijuana can be seen as an expression of these community norms. Our findings suggest that if the existing community norms are supportive of medical marijuana use, then marijuana use among teens is higher. We need to make a greater effort to change how teens view marijuana use in order to reduce marijuana use among teens.”

The study suggests that reducing marijuana use among youths will require comprehensive prevention efforts. Prevention efforts should focus on changing norms surrounding marijuana use in the community, family and among peers in order to reduce marijuana use among youths.

The paper can be found at:

Friese, B. & Grube, J. (2013). Legalization of Medical Marijuana and Marijuana Use among Youths. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 20(1), 33-39.