Marijuana Regulation and Teen Use Rates

Following the enactment of both medical cannabis access laws and adult use marijuana laws, there has not been any significant rise in self-reported marijuana use by adolescents.

“The percentage of adolescents reporting substance use decreased significantly in 2021, according to the latest results from the Monitoring the Future survey of substance use behaviors and related attitudes among eighth, 10th, and 12th graders in the United States. In line with continued long-term declines in the use of many illicit substances among adolescents previously reported by the Monitoring the Future survey, these findings represent the largest one-year decrease in overall illicit drug use reported since the survey began in 1975.”
US National Institute on Drug Abuse, December 15, 2021 news release

“Using data from the YRBS [Youth Risk Behavior Survey] for the period 1993-2019, this study provides updated estimates of the association between legalization and adolescent marijuana use. … Consistent with estimates from prior studies, there was little evidence that RMLs [recreational marijuana laws] or MMLs [medical marijuana laws] encourage youth marijuana use.”

“The overall percentage of students who reported using marijuana at least 1 time during the previous 30 days in 2019 was not measurably different from the percentage in 2009 (21 percent)…. There was no measurable difference between 2009 and 2019 in the percentage of students who reported that illegal drugs were made available to them on school property.”
National Center for Education Statistics, Marijuana Use and Illegal Drug Availability, May 2021

Perceived availability of marijuana among young people is falling nationwide

“Between 2002 and 2015, we observed a 27% overall reduction in the relative proportion of adolescents ages 12-17- and a 42 percent reduction among those ages 12-14-reporting that it would be “very easy” to obtain marijuana. This pattern was uniformly observed among youth in all sociodemographic subgroups. … Despite the legalization of recreational and medical marijuana in some states, our findings suggest that … perceptions that marijuana would be very easy to obtain are on the decline among American youth.”

“From 2002 to 2014, … the perceived availability decreased by 13 percent among persons aged 12-17 years and by three percent among persons aged 18-25 years.”

Rates of problematic cannabis use by young people has declined for the better part of the past two decades.

Adolescent treatment admissions for marijuana following recreational legalization in Colorado and Washington, Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 2020
See also: Recent Trends in the Prevalence of Marijuana Use and Associated Disorders in the United States, JAMA Psychiatry, 2016

The enactment of medical cannabis laws is not associated with any causal upticks in youth marijuana use

“Based on current evidence, we largely concur with the conclusions of other reviews. Results for adolescents under age 18 are highly consistent in showing negative or insignificant effects of MCL (medical cannabis law) enactment on the prevalence of use. … The relatively few studies that considered the specific provisions of MCLs, such as
allowances for dispensaries, have also found little evidence that such provisions matter for adolescent use outcomes."

Early evidence of the impact of cannabis legalization on cannabis use, cannabis use disorder, and the use of other substances: Findings from state policy evaluations, The American Journal of Drugs and Alcohol Abuse, 2019

“This study sought to delineate associations between state-level shifts in decriminalization and medical marijuana laws (MML) and adolescent marijuana use. Using data on 861,082 adolescents (14 to 18+ years; 51% female) drawn from 1999 to 2015 state Youth Risk Behavior Surveys (YRBS), difference-in-differences models assessed how decriminalization and MML (medical marijuana legalization) policy enactment were associated with adolescent marijuana use, controlling for tobacco and alcohol policy shifts, adolescent characteristics, and state and year trends. … Neither policy was significantly associated with heavy marijuana use or the frequency of use. … [R]esults assuage concerns over potential detrimental effects of more liberal marijuana policies on youth use.”
A quasi-experimental evaluation of marijuana policies and youth marijuana use, The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, 2019

The passage of adult use cannabis laws is not associated with any causal upticks in youth marijuana use in those jurisdictions that have enacted them

“Objectives: To examine the association between enactment of state RCLs [recreational cannabis laws] and changes in cannabis outcomes by race and ethnicity overall and by age groups in the US. … No changes were observed in any of the cannabis outcomes among participants aged 12 to 20 years of any racial or ethnic group.”
Racial and ethnic differences in cannabis use following legalization in US states with medical cannabis laws. JAMA Open Network, 2021

“Using data from the YRBS [Youth Risk Behavior Survey] for the period 1993-2019, this study provides updated estimates of the association between legalization and adolescent marijuana use. … Consistent with estimates from prior studies, there was little evidence that RMLs [recreational marijuana laws] or MMLs [medical marijuana laws] encourage youth marijuana use.”

“Consistent with the results of previous researchers, there was no evidence that the legalization of medical marijuana encourages marijuana use among youth. Moreover, the estimates reported showed that marijuana use among youth may actually decline after legalization for recreational purposes.”
Association of marijuana laws with teen marijuana use: New estimates form the Youth Risk Behavior surveys, JAMA Pediatrics, 2019