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CANNABIS LEGALIZATION AND JUVENILE ACCESS

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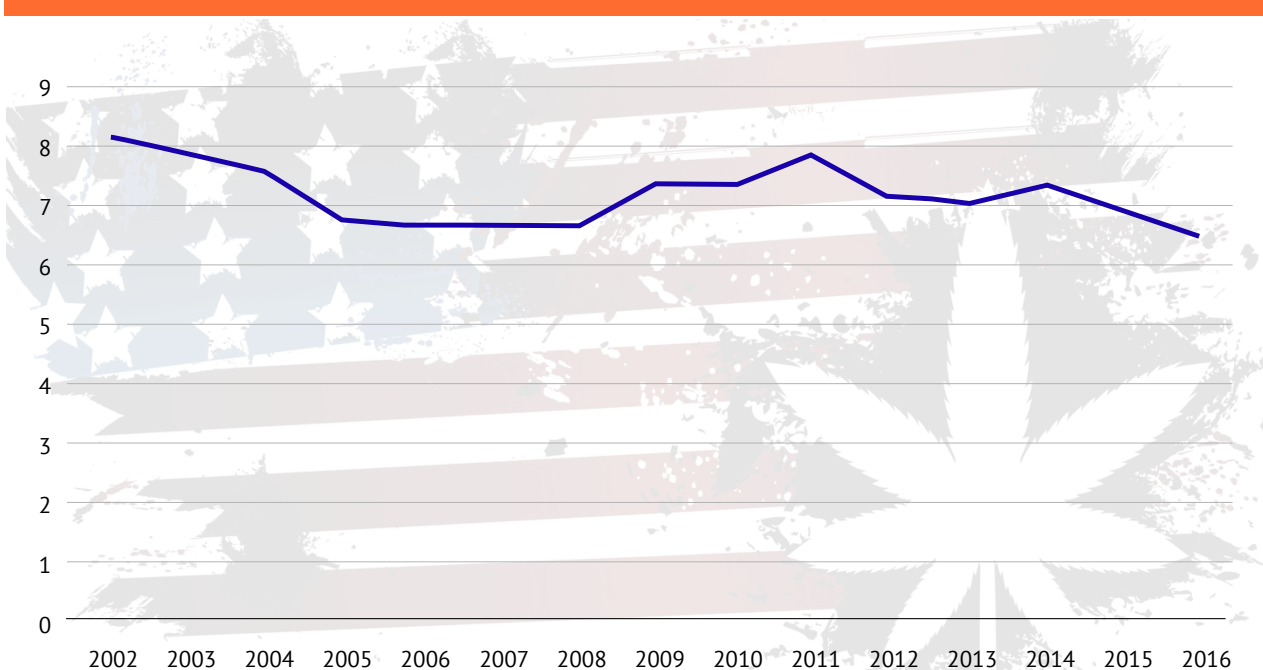
As states legalize medical and recreational cannabis use, an important policy goal has been to prevent access by juveniles. Research finds that cannabis can harm developing brains,¹ but at the same time cannabinoids can be efficacious for some medical uses in juveniles.²

TRENDS IN TEEN CANNABIS USE

Legalizing medical or recreational cannabis might boost juvenile use of cannabis due to the impression of safety and ease of access. Many studies show that cannabis advertising increases the likelihood of juvenile use.³ But at the same time some research indicates that legalizing medical cannabis leads juveniles to think cannabis is more harmful and reduces their likelihood of using it.⁴

So far there is little evidence juvenile use is increasing in states where recreational or medical use has been legalized. Through the era of cannabis legalization the rate of teen use nationwide has declined by almost 2%.⁵ (Figure 1)

FIGURE 1: PAST-MONTH MARIJUANA USE BY 12-TO-17-YEAR-OLDS



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) 2016

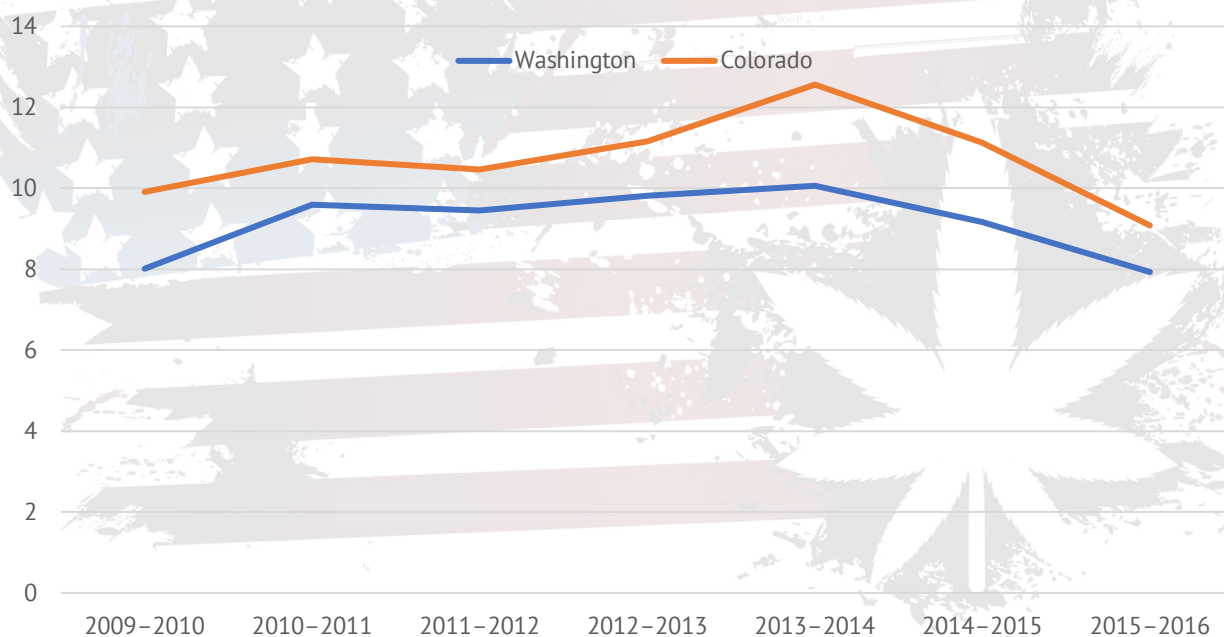
CANNABIS LEGALIZATION AND TEEN USE TRENDS

In the 1970s, 11 states decriminalized marijuana possession (meaning it was still illegal, but not prosecutable). A review of research on the effects of decriminalizing found no studies showing an increase in juvenile or adult use afterwards, and in fact those states followed

the national trend of declining use.⁶ The same review found that “to date, data have shown that state-specific legalization of medical marijuana has not led to an increase in recreational use of marijuana by adolescents.”⁷

Now that adult recreational use is legal in Washington and Colorado, research has focused on results there. The best available data source in those two states is the latest National Survey on Drug Use and Health, conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, which came out in 2017. It found that the rate of juvenile use of cannabis went up slightly immediately after legalization of adult recreational use, but has since fallen to about 1.5% less than the rate before legalization (Figure 2). Notably, the increase from 2012–2014 was not statistically significant, while the overall drop since 2009–2010 is.⁸

FIGURE 2: PAST-MONTH MARIJUANA USE BY 12-TO-17-YEAR-OLDS



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) 2016

Also informative is the *Monitoring the Future* study from February 2017.⁹ It compared juvenile use trends in Colorado and Washington with trends in the 45 contiguous states that did not legalize adult recreational cannabis and found no significant differences in rates of use for high schoolers. For 8th–10th graders, use rates in Colorado were no different than other states, but in Washington use rates did rise relative to other states.

CONCLUSION

There are not enough data yet to draw definitive conclusions on whether or not legalizing adult recreational use of cannabis will affect juvenile use. We do know that decriminalizing marijuana and legalizing medical cannabis did not increase juvenile use. And we know that so far, the evidence indicates that legalization, if anything, reduces juvenile use. Lessons we have learned about effective efforts to discourage juvenile consumption of tobacco and alcohol will likely help us reduce juvenile use of cannabis as well.



For more on cannabis policy, see reason.org/topics/drugpolicy



ENDNOTES

- ¹ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. “Policy Statement on Marijuana Legalization.” May 2017.
https://www.aacap.org/aacap/policy_statements/2014/aacap_marijuana_legalization_policy.aspx.
- ² Ammerman, Seth et al. “The Impact of Marijuana Policies on Youth: Clinical, Research, and Legal Update.” *Pediatrics*. March 2015. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/135/3/e769> .
- ³ D’Amico, Elizabeth J., Jeremy N. V. Miles and Joan Tucker. “Gateway to Curiosity: Medical Marijuana Ads and Intention and Use During Middle School.” *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*. v. 29. no. 3. 2015. 613-619. https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP50717.html ; Dai, H. “Exposure to Advertisements and Marijuana Use Among US Adolescents.” *Preventing Chronic Disease*. 2017. v 14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.170253> ; Roditisa, Maria L., Kevin Delucchi, Audrey Chang and Bonnie Halpern-Felshera. “Perceptions of social norms and exposure to pro-marijuana messages are associated with adolescent marijuana use.” *Preventive Medicine*. Volume 93. December 2016. 171-176.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743516303152>.
- ⁴ Keyes, K. M., M. Wall, M. Cerdá, J Schulenberg, P.M. O’Malley, S. Galea, T. Feng and D.S. Hasin. “How does state marijuana policy affect US youth? Medical marijuana laws, marijuana use and perceived harmfulness: 1991–2014.” *Addiction*. v111. 2016. 2187–2195.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/add.13523> .
- ⁵ Ammerman et al. “The Impact of Marijuana Policies on Youth.”
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ The NSDUH is at
<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHsaeShortTermCHG2016/NSDUHsaeShortTermCHG2016.pdf>, and for discussion see Sullum, Jacob. “Contradicting Prohibitionists, Survey Says Adolescent Pot Use Is Falling in Colorado.” *Reason*. Dec. 12, 2017.
<http://reason.com/blog/2017/12/12/contradicting-prohibitionists-survey-say> .
- ⁹ Cerdá, M., M. Wall, T. Feng, et al. “Association of State Recreational Marijuana Laws With Adolescent Marijuana Use.” *JAMA Pediatrics*. 2017. v171. No.2. 142–149
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2593707> .