

Commentary

December 20, 2011

Youth Marijuana Use Continues to Rise: The Impact of “Medical Marijuana” Policies and Legalization Efforts on Youth

Results of the Monitoring the Future (MTF) study, conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, were recently released, providing new data on drug and alcohol use by American youth. Recent changes in substance use are related to perceived risk of harm from use and to changing cultural signals toward different drugs. Discussing these trends at a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington, DC were principal investigator Lloyd Johnston, and representatives from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).¹

After long-term declines in illicit drug use, rates of illicit drug use have increased over the past four years, with lifetime rates of illicit drug use reaching 20.1%, 37.7%, and 49.9% for 8th, 10th and 12th graders respectively. The recent increases in illicit drug use and the long-term decreases in alcohol and tobacco use coincide with divergent cultural attitudes in the media in recent years.

The increases in illicit drug use are largely driven by increases in marijuana use. Marijuana remains the most widely used illegal drug, with significant increases seen from 2009 to 2010 for lifetime, past year, past 30 day and daily use across all grades² and continued gradual increases among 10th and 12th graders in 2011.³ Current daily marijuana use, defined as using the drug on 20 or more occasions in the prior month, increased from 2010 to 2011 for all grades, with statistically significant increases from 2007.⁴ In 2011 rates of daily marijuana use were 1.3% and 3.6% for 8th and 10th graders respectively while 12th graders reached a 30-year peak for daily marijuana use at 6.6%.⁵

For the first time, 12th grade students were surveyed on annual use of so-called “synthetic marijuana,” also known as “K2” and/or “spice”. A total of 11.4% reported past year synthetic marijuana use, nearly equal to a third of those who used marijuana in the past year (36.4%).⁶

Nonmedical use of prescription drugs remains a significant problem, and remained steady in 2011 after increasing through the mid-1990s and into the 2000s.⁷ Among 12th graders, 21.7% reported lifetime, 15.2% reported annual and 7.2% reported past month nonmedical use of any prescription drug.⁸

Lloyd Johnston summarized the important and contrasting positive trends seen in alcohol and tobacco use: “With alcohol and cigarettes we’ve seen a continuation of longer-term declines in 2011 and indeed for both behaviors we’re seeing the lowest levels of alcohol consumption and

smoking that we've seen in the life of the study. Binge drinking for example among high school seniors is down almost by half from what it was 30 years ago.”⁹

Comparing cultural messages of widely used illicit drugs to those of alcohol and tobacco demonstrates their impact on rates of use. It is not surprising to see a pattern of increasing marijuana use among youth because there are few clear messages to the public regarding the negative consequences of marijuana use or its synthetic alternatives. Marijuana is now legal in 16 states and the District of Columbia for “medical” use. The term “medical marijuana” suggests that the drug is safe to use and is actually a beneficial medicine. However, no real medicine is brought to legal market use by ballot initiative or legislation. All legitimate medicines are subject to stringent scientific evaluation by the Food and Drug Administration and once approved as safe for use are dispensed in professional pharmacies by prescription only. Likewise, well-funded proposals calling for decriminalization and legalization of marijuana increasingly suggest to the public, and in particular to youth, that marijuana use is acceptable.

The public is ill informed about synthetic marijuana, which until recently was legal under federal law. ONDCP Director Kerlikowske stressed the role of parents in preventing synthetic marijuana use among teens. “It’s not in the vocabulary of parents, and they need to be aware of it so when they have that conversation about substance abuse they are knowledgeable.”¹⁰ “Parents are the most powerful force in the lives of young people and we ask that all of them talk to their teens today about the serious consequences of using marijuana, K2, or spice.”¹¹

With prescription drug abuse having reached epidemic levels in the U.S., it is encouraging to see rates among youth in the Monitoring the Future study leveling off in the context of wider public recognition of the dangers of nonmedical use of prescription drugs, and especially opiate painkillers. The sheer accessibility of prescription drugs and their widespread medical use continue to give youth a false sense that it is all right to use such medicines for any use. In the last two years much-needed national attention has been brought to this problem; in early 2011 ONDCP launched a major initiative to reduce prescription drug abuse nationwide.¹²

While the long-term declines in alcohol and cigarette use are good news for the nation, they have not come either fast or easy. These declines have been supported by new laws, age restrictions on their use, education campaigns, decreases in alcohol availability particularly among younger grades, and increases in tobacco prices.^{13 14} There are clear-cut cultural messages, with little organized opposition, that discourage underage drinking and tobacco use. The dangers of binge drinking are well-known and are often a focus in the media. They are also addressed in secondary and higher education settings. Moreover, there are widely recognized zero tolerance laws for alcohol use by underage drivers. Similarly, the serious negative health consequences of smoking tobacco are widely publicized through strictly enforced no-smoking policies, restrictions on advertising to youth, and national public health campaigns.

Perceived risk of harm from use and availability of a substance greatly influences its rate of use. Perceived risk “has been falling rather sharply for marijuana over the past five years or so” while “teens’ disapproval of marijuana use also has fallen over the past three or four years, suggesting a lowering of peer norms against use.”¹⁵ There is an obvious lesson to be learned from the nation’s experiences with alcohol and tobacco use. To turn around the strong upward shift in

youth drug use, the cultural messages regarding binge drinking and tobacco use – no use – must be sent to youth regarding illegal drugs, and in particular marijuana, its synthetic alternative, and nonmedical prescription drug use.

The long-standing bipartisan restrictive drug policy of the United States has been widely attacked by those seeking to enforce “harm reduction” programs and policies which permit and even encourage substance use while working to reduce some of the “harms” to users. Harm reduction efforts to legalize and decriminalize illegal drug use contribute to the damaging messages to youth that drug use is acceptable, decreasing the perceived risk of use and increased use rates. In particular, efforts to remove the criminal justice system from drug policy and prevention by legalizing use of marijuana and other currently illegal drugs pose significant public health risks. The well-funded efforts to normalize nonmedical drug use, especially marijuana use, are driving up youth drug use rates. The nation needs a united voice rejecting youth drug use the way the nation is clearly united in opposition to the use of alcohol and tobacco use by youth.

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) supports the nation’s current restrictive drug policy which works to reduce the demand for illegal drugs by providing effective prevention and treatment while also working to reduce the drug supply and enforce drug laws.

For more information on the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc., visit www.ibhinc.org.

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