

Washington State Recreational Marijuana Legalization: Parent and Adolescent Perceptions, Knowledge, and Discussions in a Sample of Low-Income Families

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In November 2012, the states of Washington and Colorado legalized nonmedical use of marijuana by adults. A possible consequence of these new laws is an increase in adolescent use due to greater exposure to and availability of marijuana. Adolescent nonmedical marijuana use remains illegal and is related to negative physical and mental health outcomes.

One potential way to prevent these negative impacts is through parents communicating with and monitoring their adolescent children. However, it is unknown whether parents and adolescents have accurate knowledge about what is legal under the new marijuana laws and whether parents are discussing marijuana use with their adolescent children in connection with changes in the law.

This study provides a snapshot from the summer of 2013 of parents' and adolescents' perceptions, knowledge, and discussions about marijuana use and legalization.

Participants were a subset of families enrolled in an ongoing prevention study in Tacoma, Washington. Each family included a parent and a middle school-aged adolescent. Most of the parents responding to the study questions were female (80%), while half of the adolescents were male and half were female. Families were racially diverse and low income.

Results

Both parents and youth indicated that the change in Washington law resulted in relatively little change in their attitudes about the favorability of marijuana use or the likelihood they would use marijuana. However, participants displayed uncertainty

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- ◆ Conduct research on factors that influence development
- ◆ Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- ◆ Study service systems and work to improve them
- ◆ Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- ◆ Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

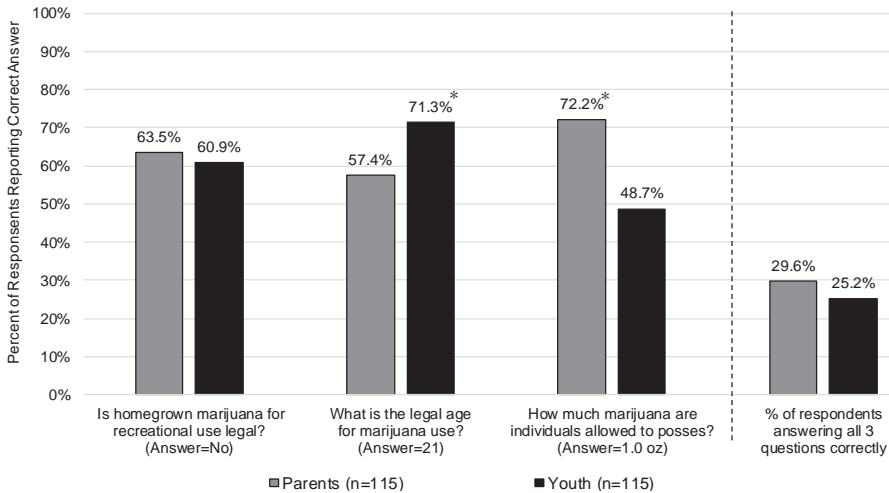
Key Messages

- Both parents and youth indicated that the new marijuana law resulted in relatively little change in their attitudes about the favorability of marijuana use or the likelihood they would use marijuana.
- Participants displayed uncertainty about what is legal and illegal under the new law.
- Most families reported discussing the new law, although not very frequently.
- Results suggest the need for a public health campaign targeting families to provide clear information about the retail marijuana law.

about what is legal or illegal under the new law, as shown in Figure 1. For example, fewer than 60% of parents knew that the legal age for nonmedical marijuana use in their state is 21. Less than one third of parents and only one fourth of youth correctly answered all three questions on their knowledge about the new law. Overall, 70.4% of parents

indicated discussing the marijuana law with their adolescent child, although these discussions took place only a small number of times. How often? Participants reported frequency of discussions about the new law on a 5-point scale: 0=*Never*; 2=*Rarely*; 3=*Sometimes*; 4=*Fairly Often*; 5=*Very Often*. The mean frequency was 2.47: between *rarely* and *sometimes*.

Figure 1. Parent and youth knowledge of Washington State marijuana laws

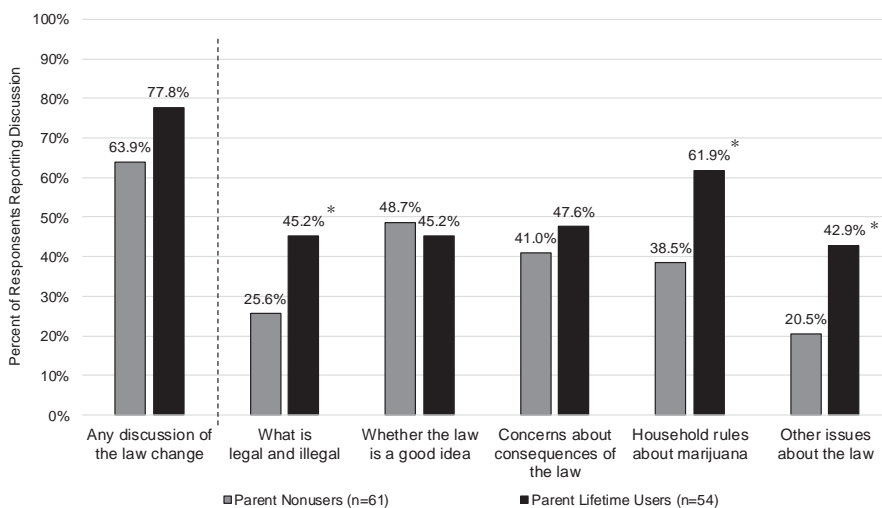


The most common topic of conversation was *household rules about marijuana*, which half of the sample discussed with their family. For almost all of the topics in Figure 2, parents who were lifetime users of marijuana reported more conversations with their children than parents who were nonusers. The only exception was “whether the law is a good idea.”

Conclusion

This study provides a first look at perceptions, knowledge, and parent-child discussions about an emerging and critically important issue: marijuana legalization. Importantly, both parents and youth displayed uncertainty in their understanding of core aspects of what is legal and illegal under the new law. Parent-child discussions about marijuana legalization were not uncommon (as expected given media attention on the issue), but did not occur at a high frequency. Results suggest there should be a public health campaign focused on families that provides clear information about changes in marijuana laws.

Figure 2. Percentage of families reporting types of conversations about the new marijuana law



For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original article:

Mason, W. Alex, Hanson, Koren, Fleming, Charles B., Ringle, Jay L., & Haggerty, Kevin P. (2015).

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