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Legalization of Marijuana in Washington State Shown to Have Had No Effect on Teens' Access to Drug

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Study to be presented at Pediatric Academic Societies 2016 Meeting shows no change in proportion of adolescents who find it "easy" to access marijuana after its recreational use was legalized for adults.

BALTIMORE, MD – Despite concerns that legalizing marijuana use for adults would make it easier for adolescents to get ahold of it, a new study in Washington State shows that teens find it no easier now than before the law was passed in 2012.

An abstract of the study, "Adolescents' Ease of Access to Marijuana Before and After Legalization of Marijuana in Washington State," will be presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies 2016 Meeting in Baltimore on Sunday, May 1. Researchers compared 2010 and 2014 data from the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey. Each year's survey included questions about ease of access to marijuana, alcohol, cigarettes and other illicit drugs.

There was virtually no change in the proportion of teens who reported it was "easy" to access marijuana in 2010 (55 percent), compared to 2014 (54 percent) after the new law was enacted, according to the study. This seemingly good news was tempered by additional findings suggesting that current public health efforts around drug abuse prevention may be less effective for marijuana than for other substances teens now perceive as more difficult to obtain. Significantly more adolescents said it was "hard" to access alcohol in 2014 (47 percent, compared with 43 percent in 2010), cigarettes (53 percent in 2014; 42 percent in 2010), and other illegal drugs such as cocaine, LSD, and amphetamines (82 percent in 2014; 75 percent in 2010).

"It is both surprising and reassuring that teens didn't perceive that marijuana was easier to access after it was legalized for recreational use by adults," said senior investigator Andrew Adesman, MD, FAAP, chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at the Cohen Children's Medical Center of New York. "It was interesting and somewhat concerning, though, that while teens responded that it was harder to access cigarettes, alcohol, and psychoactive drugs abuse in 2014 compared to 4 years earlier, they didn't report increased difficulty in obtaining marijuana during that same time period," he said.

Principal investigator Natalie Colaneri said she hopes the findings will prompt increased efforts to reduce teens' access to marijuana in Washington and other states now considering the legalization of adult recreational marijuana use. "Given the detrimental health effects associated with adolescent marijuana use, it is important that states that choose to legalize marijuana take steps to minimize use by teens. States should specifically implement measures that make it more difficult for teens to access marijuana in the first place," she said.

Ms. Colaneri will present the abstract on Sunday, May 1, at 4 p.m. in room 302 at the Baltimore Convention Center.

Read the abstract.

Please note: only the abstract is being presented at the meeting. In some cases, the researcher may have more data available to share with media, or may be preparing a longer article for submission to a journal. Contact the researcher for more information.

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