

Local view: **America's persistent marijuana conundrum**

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Every year the results of the latest national survey on drug-abuse trends among American youths are released. As a society, are we doing a better or worse job of preventing the exposure of our young people to the growing variety of mood-altering, potentially damaging and often addictive substances? Faced with the annual barrage of facts and figures, which ones really matter?

Consider these key facts from the 2013 Monitoring the Future Study, which was released last month.

Consider first the good news. The use of synthetic marijuana declined. From 2012 to 2013, synthetic marijuana use among high school seniors fell from 11.3 percent to 7.9 percent. Use of these synthetic cannabinoid compounds that are haphazardly manufactured and sprayed on inert plant materials and marketed as herbal incense has sent tens of thousands to the nation's emergency rooms. Apparently word is getting out and sinking in.

These synthetic chemicals have unpredictable and deleterious effects. Perhaps no city knows that better than Duluth, where in 2013 the local retail supply of such products was successfully curtailed.

In other good news, both alcohol and tobacco use continued their decades-long downward trends. Still, 68 percent of high school seniors have used alcohol at least once and 39 percent in the past month. The dangerous consequences of excessive drinking remain apparent.

As for cigarettes, 38 percent of high school seniors have used them at least once and 16 percent in the past month.

But now more kids smoke marijuana than smoke cigarettes. Among high school seniors, 16 percent smoke cigarettes and 22.7 percent smoke weed. Good news? Bad news? Both? Neither?

Moreover, from 2012 to 2013, marijuana use increased among 8th and 10th graders and held steady among high school seniors: 22.7 percent used in past month and 36.4 percent in past year; 45 percent reported lifetime use.

These elevated marijuana trends are not such good news. Why? Research has established that marijuana affects the areas of the brain related to cognition, memory and learning, the same activities required to successfully transition into adulthood. And a recent longitudinal study found regular marijuana use starting in teen years and continuing into adulthood was associated with a drop in IQ compared with subjects who did not use marijuana.

As Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute in Drug Abuse, pointed out, because of the higher potency of today's marijuana, "Daily use today can have stronger effects on a developing teen brain than it did 10 or 20 years ago."

And what about the states that allow medical marijuana? According to the new survey, in these states, one-third of the marijuana-using kids report obtaining it from another's medical marijuana prescription. Six percent had their own marijuana prescription.

So if you think the world of drug abuse that adolescents face today is the same as the one of your youth, think again. Even as we continue to amass statistics, conduct more research and fan the flames of the longstanding, polarizing debate, there remain no simple or obvious solutions to our marijuana dilemma.

With a growing body of evidence about the harms of marijuana use for young teenagers on the one hand, and the growing public support for decriminalization of use on the other, worlds continue to collide.

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