https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/best-of-copo-pot-goes-to-school-with-marijuana-legal/article_dc690848-fff7-11e8-898f-6ffaa9871ba6.htm

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COLLATERAL IMPACT

The unintended consequences of legalizing pot

Colorado's cultural acceptance of marijuana by adults is seeping into public school classrooms.

The result is more marijuana-related suspensions of students, more police visits to schools for marijuana incidents, and a greater acceptance of the drug by students who live in communities with recreational dispensaries, two new state studies and a third from a university institute show.

Twenty times in a typical school day, Colorado kids are reported for illegal marijuana use.

Statewide, marijuana suspensions jumped 18 percent in the 2016-17 school year, new data from the Colorado Department of Education show.

A separate study by the state Division of Criminal Justice also suggests the drug has become a growing enforcement problem. Police contacts for marijuana jumped from 17 percent of all contacts for the 2012 and 2013 school years to one in four last school year. Alcohol and other drugs lagged far behind in police calls.

While those numbers are up, the 3,147 marijuana suspensions in the last school year still represent only 1 percent of Colorado's public school population.

But the numbers also show some kids are starting to smoke or ingest marijuana at very young ages.

One-seventh of the offenses recorded last year involved middle school children, and prosecutors say some children start smoking pot as young as 11 years old.

The new Division of Criminal Justice numbers from last school year show 368 total incidents of all types at elementary schools, with 13 percent involving marijuana. At middle schools, 18 percent of the total 1,809 incidents involved pot, as did 30 percent of the total 4,118 incidents at high schools.

A study finalized in March from the Institute of Cannabis Research at Colorado State University-Pueblo includes a look at attitudes and perceptions of high school students in communities that since 2014 have opened recreational pot stores, such as Pueblo, and those that have not, including Colorado Springs.

Conclusions are that students in Colorado communities that permit recreational dispensaries used more cannabis and thought marijuana was less harmful and less wrong than high school students in communities that did not allow recreational pot stores.

The study offers this as a possible explanation: "The high school students mirror the behavior and perceptions of the adult population of their communities."

The findings were surprising, said Rick Kreminski, institute director and executive director of research and sponsored programs at CSU-Pueblo, "not because there's a difference between students in communities that permitted cannabis dispensaries compared with communities that did not, but because there was no statistical change pre- and post-2014," Kreminski said.

Student attitudes have remained the same before and after legalization in terms of how harmful students perceive the use of marijuana to be and how wrong they think cannabis use is, Kreminski said.

Gregory Ecks, director of student discipline services for Colorado Springs School District 11, said it was only logical that students in cities where marijuana has been embraced would find it more acceptable. "Any time something is considered legal and has been discussed as having benefits, you're going to see kids default to it," Ecks said. "There's become an acceptance, and kids are going to experiment."

Dueling data

Considerable debate swirls around the question of teen use rates since Colorado legalized recreational marijuana for adults, with stores opening in 2014 following passage of a constitutional amendment in late 2012. One widely quoted state report — the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey — found no significant change in juvenile use from 2013 to 2015.

Critics of that study say it takes only one snapshot every two years, and some of Colorado's largest school districts — including those in Jefferson and Douglas counties and most districts in El Paso County — did not take part in 2015.But Mike Van Dyke, chief of environmental epidemiology at the state Department of Public Health and Environment, stands by Healthy Kids' conclusions. He said fewer middle school students took the survey in 2015 but 16,000 high school students took part, and long-term trends suggest marijuana use by high school students peaked in the 1990s.

"We believe it's the best survey available of marijuana use among high school kids," he said.

Some law enforcement and school officials say that doesn't match the reality they see.

They prefer to cite statistics gathered by Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, an organization of police groups whose goal is to reduce drug use, which shows teen marijuana use increasing over time.

Its section on marijuana use by youth relies on a survey by a federal agency, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSA), and ignores the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, although both are incorporated into the overarching federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics.

The two surveys apparently have at least one question in common: Have you used marijuana over the past 30 days? The most recent Healthy Kids report showed 21 percent of teens said they had used marijuana within the past 30 days, a figure that hasn't changed much in recent years.

The SAMSA survey, which cites Colorado as the most prevalent state for youth pot smoking, showed 16.5 percent answered the question positively, but that was an increase from previous years. In 2013-14 it was 15 percent, and in 2008-09 it was only about 10 percent, according to the report.

Levon Hupfer, an addiction counselor who runs the juvenile diversion program in Adams County, harbors little doubt that more kids are getting stoned at school.

He calls it tragic that the first state to legalize recreational marijuana is short of adolescent psychiatrists and residential treatment centers for kids with drug troubles.

"At the end of the day, Colorado kids have lost. Colorado families have lost," Hupfer said. "We're failing as a state." An analysis found that when kids are caught stoned at school, enforcement policies vary greatly. Some districts routinely call police. Others simply send students home.

In cases where police took action, arrests were infrequent. Statewide, tickets accounted for 97 percent of all penalties and arrests accounted for 3 percent last school year. That was down from 7 percent arrests the year before.

Eclipsing alcohol

Behind all these numbers are the kids.

He's a handsome, charming boy with blond-streaked brown hair and a touch of teenage acne. He describes his family as upper middle class. He started smoking pot when he was a 15-year-old high school sophomore. Two years later he is hoping to pass Douglas County's juvenile diversion program.

It hasn't been easy. He failed seven urinalysis tests before he was clean enough to enter the program. Relapses followed. A friend introduced him to marijuana after his sophomore sweetheart broke his heart.

"You can forget everything. It helps you sleep at night. You can become loose with the world," his friend said. It worked. He felt he didn't have a worry in the world. He reveled in strands of deep thought, though he promptly forgot them.

His habit grew. By the time a police officer spotted marijuana in the backseat of his car, he was smoking an ounce a month of today's potent strains. In a county without dispensaries, he had three illegal dealers. The seized marijuana came from a fellow teenager. "I think she had a private grower," he said.

Months of counseling persuaded him that he was avoiding uncomfortable feelings and possibly damaging his adolescent brain.

Finally, he dumped his remaining stash. He put his glass bongs in his car and tossed them out onto some rocks. Then he called his counselor. He has stayed straight for about three months and enjoys feeling clear-headed.

But at the high school he attends, "almost everyone I know has tried or uses it. Football team, basketball team, cheerleaders," he said

His counselor, Seiji Wallis, sees marijuana eclipsing alcohol as a drug problem among juveniles who enter his program.

"In diversion we have a much higher percentage of clients whose charge is marijuana or paraphernalia," he said. "I think it's an enormous problem, almost epidemic."

Pot easy to get

At Westminster High School north of Denver, three of its students — Ezequiel, L.J. and Jesus — gathered in a conference room with their principal to discuss the prevalence of pot use among their friends and classmates. They say it's easy to get, but they don't touch it themselves. They're student athletes, and avoiding marijuana is a requirement for team sports at this 2,400-student school.

But among them, they know at least 15 classmates who do smoke illegally. And they're sophomores. Sometimes they smell it on a classmate returning from lunch. Sometimes they notice a friend has vanished at lunchtime, skipping afternoon classes. "In school I've personally had someone ask me if I wanted any," Jesus said. Jesus turned him down, but he didn't turn him in. "I told him not to do it again." Ezequiel understood why. Snitch once, and "you have a bad reputation for the rest of your high school career," he said.

Entering a marijuana dispensary is not as simple as walking into a liquor store. The products are kept behind locked doors, and adult IDs are required to enter. Yet the Westminster High kids agreed that marijuana is easier to get than alcohol — and more popular. "Alcohol has been around for a long time," Ezequiel explained. The boys say some comes from homes of parents who smoke and some from young adults who buy from dispensaries to sell smaller amounts on the street.

Among Colorado high schools, Westminster has a relatively high suspension rate and often involves police. That's because "we don't turn a blind eye to it at all," said principal Kiffany Kiewiet.

After four years of enforcement efforts, she said, suspensions are finally dropping this year. But it took work. Recreational marijuana "completely changed how you manage a school," she said. Sometimes it's impossible for kids to avoid reeking of it. About once a week, a student gets suspected of coming to school stoned when "it's just from whoever brought them to school," Kiewiet said. As a mother, she worries about the age Colorado kids get introduced to marijuana. "Even he knows about it," she said of her son, "and he's only 10."

Stacey Collis, president of the Colorado Association of School Resource Officers, also believes marijuana use is rising in the schools.

He also sees a trend toward "highly concentrated marijuana products. We are seeing a lot of that," he said, adding that, in his view, marijuana is more of a school problem than alcohol. "It's been a long time since I've written an alcohol ticket," he said.

Police reporting policies differ In Arapahoe County, District Attorney George Brauchler is a Republican and candidate for state attorney general. In Adams County, District Attorney Dave Young is a Democrat. On marijuana, they share political views, agreeing it has been a bad deal for kids. "There's an absolute increase" in marijuana use among school children, Young said. "The increase in violations is out of control." Compared to alcohol, "it's much easier to smoke pot in high school." "This is a burgeoning problem," Brauchler said. "There are a good number of kids who report their first use at age 11."

Statewide, about one-fourth of all marijuana suspensions are accompanied by law enforcement referrals, according to state data.

How schools actually handle marijuana offenses depends on the district.

In Jefferson County, 62 percent of marijuana offenses involve some law enforcement penalty. "Jeffco has a traditional, straightforward approach to pot," said Jennifer Gallegos, its manager of student discipline. "They will contact police and let police decide whether to write a ticket."

Gallegos previously worked at Thornton High School in Adams County, where she said the district applied a different policy. There, police would be called "for possession, not necessarily for consumption," she said.

Thornton High reported 50 marijuana suspensions last year — and no referrals to police. Its principal, Jennifer Skrobela, referred questions about marijuana policies to Adams 12 Five Star Schools spokesman Joe Ferdani.

He said the absence of law enforcement reports could be attributed partly to the presence of school resource officers, who juggle important issues such as school security along with marijuana use.

'A marketing ploy'

Marijuana has delivered on its promise to generate a new source of taxes in Colorado. Last fiscal year alone, the state reported $211 million in marijuana taxes, and that amount is projected to grow to $307 million in the next three years.

Public schools are leading recipients of this money. At least $40 million a year, for example, is dedicated to repairing and replacing existing schools. But that merely plugs a small hole in the overall repair and replacement needs identified by the education department, which total $13.9 billion.

Some education officials say marijuana taxes have created a false public perception that school budget problems have been solved. "We did not support legalization for education dollars," Jeffco Public Schools spokeswoman Diana Wilson said. Many in public education felt it was a marketing ploy to get it passed that has skewed the public perception of how much it actually helps."

Her district, for example, received a $825,000 grant from marijuana taxes last year to hire school health professionals. Its general fund budget: $697 million.

While the grant is appreciated, she said, "there are nowhere near enough marijuana tax dollars to make a significant difference in K-12 public education funding shortages."

Mason Tvert, co-director of the campaign to legalize recreational pot use in 2012, said education officials asked for marijuana tax money, and it has been used for everything from improving rural schools to school dropout prevention. "No one ever claimed the tax money would fill every void in the state budget," he said, but as of last May, schools alone had reaped $118 million. "To say $118 million is no big deal is ridiculous," he said.

A reason to leave the state

For thousands of kids, the consequence for smoking pot is a trip to the principal's office. For Aubree Adams' eldest son, the outcome was more severe. She became an anti-marijuana crusader after he tried to kill himself at the age of 15.

He had swallowed 250 ibuprofen tablets, and she found him "in a bedroom full of vomit," she said. "He was in a psychiatric ward for five days." At the hospital, she said, he admitted to "dabbing," a means of ingesting nearly pure THC. She was stunned. "What the heck's a dab?" she asked. She and her husband learned he had been hiding a big secret. In Pueblo, he had started using marijuana edibles in the eighth grade. "

We knew his behavior was changing but didn't know why," she said. "It was very apparent he was coming home impaired." His hospitalization was followed by three more before she was able to find an intensive treatment program for him — in Houston. "Finally, we have our son back," but at great emotional and financial costs, she said. "I will be paying this off for a long time." She is giving up on Colorado as a place to live. "There are so many parents using that these kids don't stand a chance," she said. This summer she plans to return to Texas to look for a new home.She says her kids aren't coming back.

Data journalist Burt Hubbard contributed to this report.