

A significant concern related to marijuana commercialization is an increase in use by youth ages 12-17. There are multiple factors that can impact youth use rates including ease of access, potency, delivery methods, perception of harm, and community norms. Several studies and polls have detailed increased youth use following state commercialization. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Vermont, Maine and the District of Columbia all reported youth (ages 12-17) use rates above the national average following commercialization. What is reported as being seen in states that have commercialized cannabis is youth have fewer barriers to gaining access to marijuana at a time when the potency of the drug is growing larger.

Marijuana today is much different than it was even a decade ago. THC potency has significantly increased in the last several years leading to greater levels of impairment. New methods for consumption, such as edibles, waxes, dabs, and vaping, continue to evolve. Edibles, waxes and dabs are known for their higher concentrations of THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, which causes the “high” feeling. These higher potency products are leading to longer lasting and more significant health impacts. Youth in particular are more vulnerable because adolescence is a time of substantial brain development and learning. The earlier a psychoactive chemical is introduced, the greater risk a person is to develop a substance use disorder. This is especially true with higher potency products. Several studies have linked high potency cannabis to psychosis (di Forti, The Lancet Psychiatry Journal, May 2019). Another delivery method for high-potency THC products is vaping. Unfortunately, in the last few years we have seen a substantial increase in vaping. In DuPage County, youth vaping rates more than doubled from 2016 to 2018 across the surveyed grade levels (8th, 10th, 12th grade DuPage County Illinois Youth Survey Reports). We also know that in 2018 among participants who identified as marijuana users, 57% of 8th graders, 64% of 10th graders, and 65% of 12th graders reported use by vaping (DuPage County Illinois Youth Survey Report).

Regardless of intent, when communities commercialize marijuana, the message to youth is that the substance is less dangerous. National data from Monitoring the Future shows youth perception of risk associated with underage use continues to decrease. Though it is not always the case, this is often an early indicator of increased use. According to that same survey, one out of four U.S. high school seniors would try marijuana or use it more often if it was legal. Another factor in youth use is how communities within commercialized states respond. Many counties and municipalities within legalized states have opted out of commercial marijuana. This is true even in California and Colorado, the most frequently mentioned commercialized states. In California 81% of municipalities and 59% of counties do not allow commercial shops in their communities. For Colorado those numbers are about 75% of municipalities and 65% counties. Retail density is another important factor to consider. Researchers found in Oregon that there was a correlation in higher youth use rates in locations with a greater number of dispensaries (Researchers Tracking Public Health Impacts of Marijuana Legalization, Hatch 2017).

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