

The Changing Marijuana Landscape

Over the past decade, the national landscape regarding marijuana use has changed dramatically. In 2012, Colorado and Washington became the first states to legalize the adult use of marijuana by individuals 21 and over. Ten years later, 19 states plus the District of Columbia have legalized adult marijuana use, including four of the six states that border Utah (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico). Here in Utah, adult marijuana use is not legal, but medical marijuana use became legal in 2018. The first of 14 state licensed marijuana “pharmacies” opened in 2020, and one additional pharmacy is scheduled to open later in 2022. Currently, 37 states (plus Washington DC) have laws allowing marijuana use for medical purposes. Given these circumstances, there has been growing concern among prevention professionals about the potential for increased use of marijuana, and the consequences that can result (increased risk of addiction, impaired driving, injuries, lung disease, etc.). With marijuana use now legal (medical and/or adult use) in nearly 75% of U.S. states, beliefs about the harmfulness of marijuana use have diminished as the general public increasingly perceives marijuana as “medicine,” and safe for “recreational” adult use. Additionally, legalization has increased the availability of marijuana as the number of marijuana dispensaries has burgeoned across the country. These dispensaries make the purchase of marijuana more accessible, both through the open market, and as a result of legally purchased marijuana products becoming diverted to the black market.

Marijuana Use Rates in Utah

Marijuana has historically been the illicit drug with the highest use rates in both Utah and the nation. While rates in Utah are low in comparison to most other states, there has been an alarming increasing trend in use within the state. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) provides estimates of past 30 day marijuana use for adults and youth 12 years and older. According to the NSDUH, Utah’s use rate increased dramatically, from 3.1% in 2009, to 6.4% in 2019 (7.7% in 2020). In 2020, use increased further, particularly for youth, but this may be attributable to sampling and methodology issues with the 2020 NSDUH¹. Nationally, use rates also increased over the same time period, but at a more moderate pace, from 6.8% to 10.8% (11.7% in 2020) (see Figure 1). A closer look at the Utah data suggests that through 2019, the increasing trend in marijuana use was primarily driven by adults (18 and older) rather than by youth (Figure 2). For youth, use rates peaked in 2013 & 2014, then decreased, and became relatively stable through 2019. For adults in Utah, there has been a very steady increasing rate. Some of the increased use observed since 2018 may be attributable to legal medical use, but the upward trend had clearly begun prior to the 2018 legislation that made medical marijuana legal in Utah. In looking at a breakout of Utah adult use by age group, increasing trends were seen for Utah adults in both the young adult (ages 18-25), and older adult (26 and over) age groups, but young adults have consistently had a much higher use rates than older

Figure 1. Past 30 Day Marijuana Use Trends Ages 12 and Older: Utah vs. U.S. 2009-2020 (NSDUH)

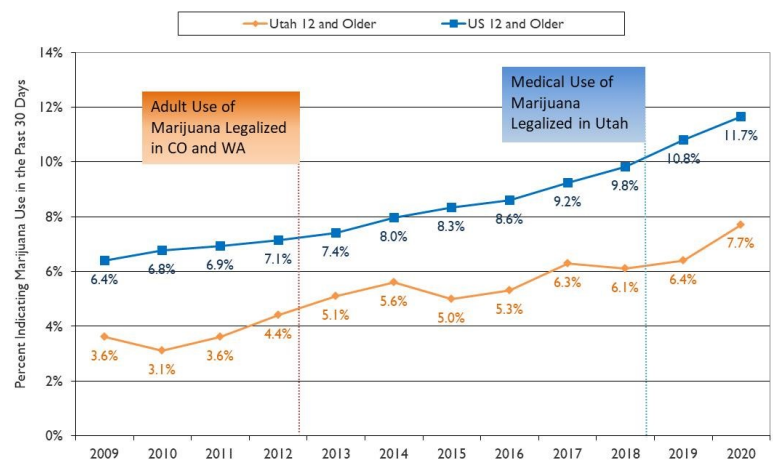
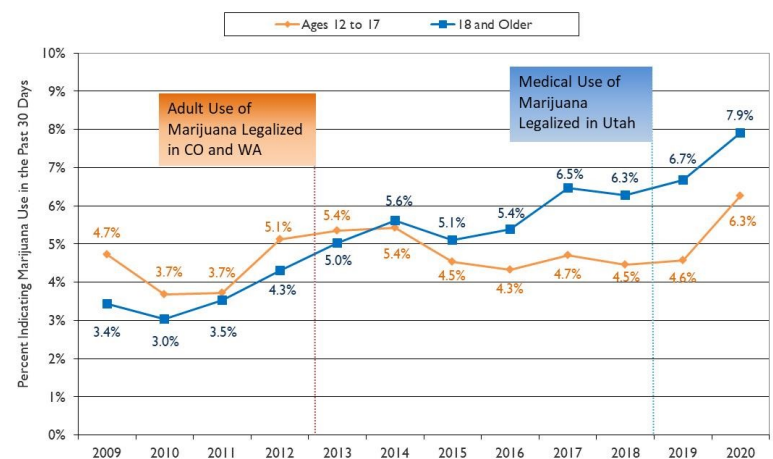


Figure 2. Utah Past 30 Day Marijuana Use Trends by Age 2009-2020 (NSDUH)



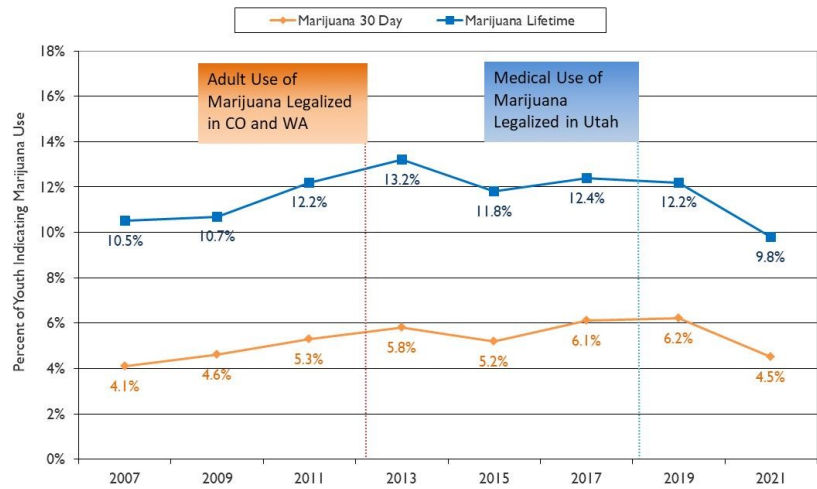
¹The 2020 NSDUH was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of completed surveys was much smaller than usual, and changes to survey administration were required as a result of COVID-19 mitigation protocols that are likely to have impacted the data (e.g., from in-person surveys to internet based administration).

Marijuana Use Rates (continued)

adults. For example, in 2020, the 30 day use rate for young adults was 16.3%, compared to 6.1% for older adults.

For youth, the Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) Survey² also provides estimates of marijuana use, and is based on a much larger sample than the NSDUH. Figure 3 presents 30 day and lifetime use rates for Utah youth from the SHARP Survey. According to the SHARP, past 30 day marijuana use rates increased substantially from 4.1% (for grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 combined) in 2007, to 6.2% in 2019 (a 51% increase), before a large decrease was observed in 2021³. Most of the increase in youth use rates occurred from 2007 through 2013. This coincides with a timeframe where public discourse about marijuana was highly salient, and proponents for the legalization of adult marijuana use made their first successful effort for legalization in 2012. Fortunately, there have not been additional dramatic increases in Utah’s youth marijuana rates since 2013, despite the fact that a growing number of states have legalized adult use, and medical use is now legal in Utah. For now, prevention efforts to reduce youth marijuana use appear to be helping to keep rates relatively steady. However, given the ever changing landscape regarding marijuana, monitoring and preventing youth marijuana use remains an important prevention priority.

Figure 3. Utah Youth (Grades 6-12 Combined) Marijuana Use Trends 2007-2021 (SHARP)



Risk Factors for Youth Marijuana Use

The Utah SHARP survey contains several items that measure youth beliefs and attitudes about marijuana, and these attitudes are often predictive of marijuana use (i.e., as attitudes become more favorable, the likelihood of use increases). Examples of these items include questions asking youth to indicate: a) how much they feel someone risks harming themselves if they smoke marijuana regularly, b) how wrong they feel it is for someone their age to smoke marijuana, and c) how wrong their parents would feel it is for them to smoke marijuana (perceived parental disapproval). Overall, youth responses to these marijuana risk factor items were trending toward increased risk for marijuana use since 2009, but appear to be moving in a favorable direction in recent years (Figure 4). From 2009 to 2017, the percentage of youth (in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 combined) that felt it was Wrong or Very Wrong for someone their age to smoke marijuana dropped from 90.7% to 85.7%, as did those who believed there was Moderate or Great Risk in using marijuana regularly, from 86.9% to 78.9%. However, since 2017, there have been small increases in the percentage of youth who feel it is wrong and who perceive it is risky to use marijuana. These attitudinal changes correlate with the leveling off of youth marijuana use rates and the recent decrease in use observed through the SHARP. Prevention professionals should be encouraged by these changes as they hopefully signal that prevention efforts to reduce youth marijuana use are working, despite the challenges associated with adult and medical marijuana legalization.

Figure 4. Beliefs and Attitudes about Marijuana (Grades 6-12 Combined) - Utah 2009-2021 (SHARP)



²The SHARP survey measures substance use and other problem behaviors as well as risk and protective factors in youth. The survey is administered across the state every other year to Utah students in grades 6, 8, 10 & 12.

³Overall, rates of substance use were substantially lower in 2021. This is likely attributable partially to dynamics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be important to examine future data to understand whether the 2021 data represent a reliable and durable change in youth marijuana use.