

Marijuana use in Utah

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Utah
Prevention
Network



Utah Department of
Health & Human
Services

The evolving marijuana landscape

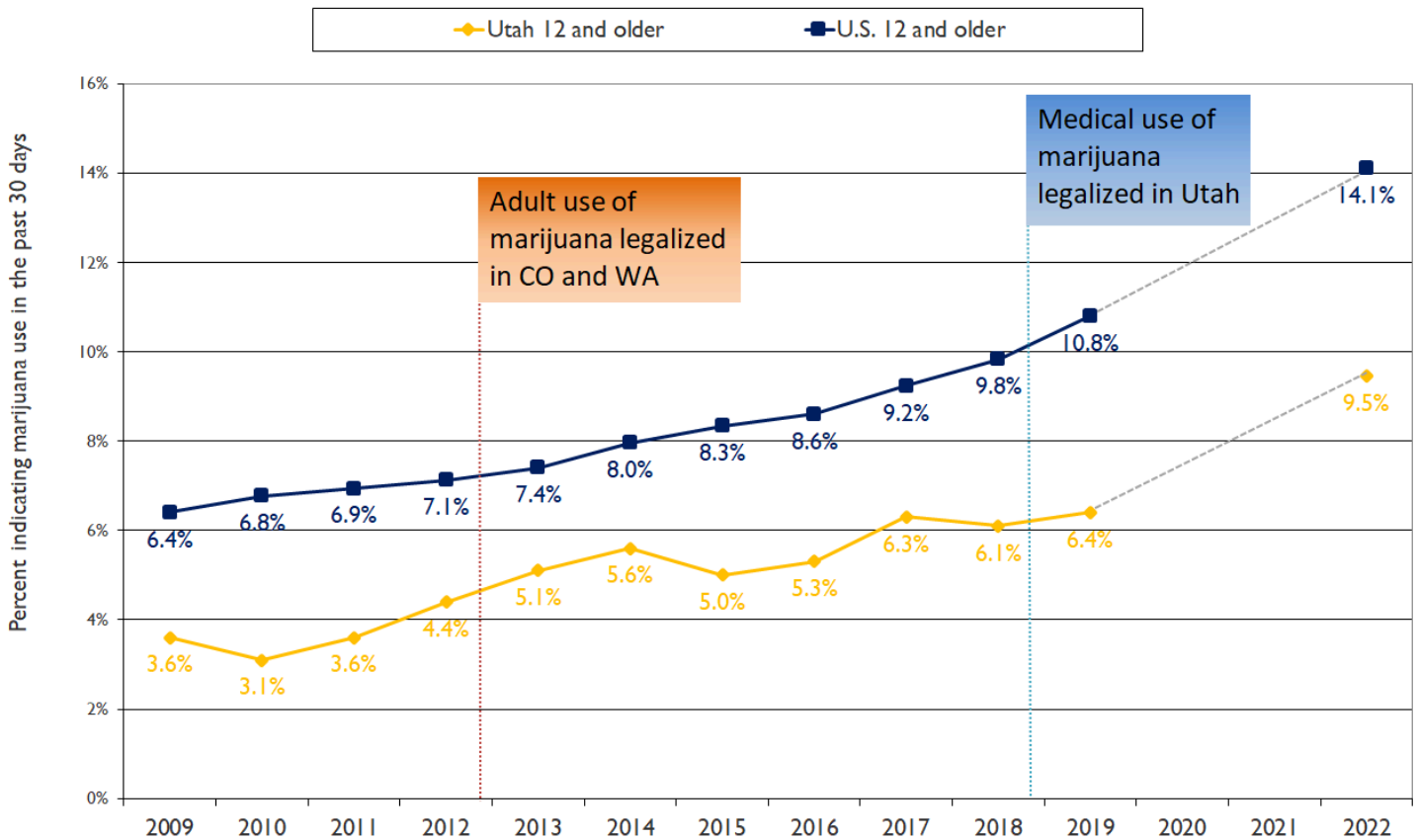
Over the past two decades, the national landscape around marijuana (or cannabis) has changed dramatically. Public opinion regarding marijuana use has become increasingly favorable, and a large number of states have passed laws legalizing the “recreational” use of marijuana by adults. In 2012, Colorado and Washington became the first states to legalize the adult use of marijuana by individuals 21 and older. Twelve years later, a total of 24 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). In Utah, adult marijuana use is not legal; however, medical marijuana use was legalized in 2018. Currently, a total of 38 states (plus Washington DC) have laws allowing marijuana use for medical purposes. The first of 15 state-licensed marijuana dispensaries opened in Utah in early 2020. Given the dramatic changes in the marijuana landscape across the nation and within Utah, there has been concern among prevention professionals about the potential for increased use of marijuana, and the consequences that could result (increased risk of addiction, impaired driving, injuries, lung disease, etc.). With marijuana use now legal (medical or adult use) in more than 75% of U.S. states, beliefs about the harmfulness of marijuana use have diminished as the general public increasingly perceives marijuana as “medicine,” and as safe for “recreational” adult use. Legalization has increased the availability of marijuana as the number of marijuana dispensaries has grown across the country. These dispensaries make the purchase of marijuana much 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

Historically, marijuana has been the illicit drug with the highest use rates in Utah and the nation. Figure 1 presents marijuana use rates for Utah and the U.S. collected through the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), which provides estimates of past 30-day marijuana use for adults and youth 12 years and older. In comparing Utah to the nation, it is clear that Utahns use marijuana at much lower rates than our national counterparts. However, similar to the nation, the use of marijuana has been increasing steadily in Utah over the past decade. According to the NSDUH, the use rate in Utah doubled from 3.1% in 2009 to 6.4% in 2019, and estimates of use reached nearly 10% in 2022.¹ Nationally, use rates also increased over the same time period, but at a slightly more moderate pace, from 6.8% to 10.8% (14.1% in 2022).

[1] Data were not released for the NSDUH in 2020 and 2021 due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on survey administration. Data collected prior to 2020 is not directly comparable to data collected after 2020 due to changes in the methodology of the NSDUH.

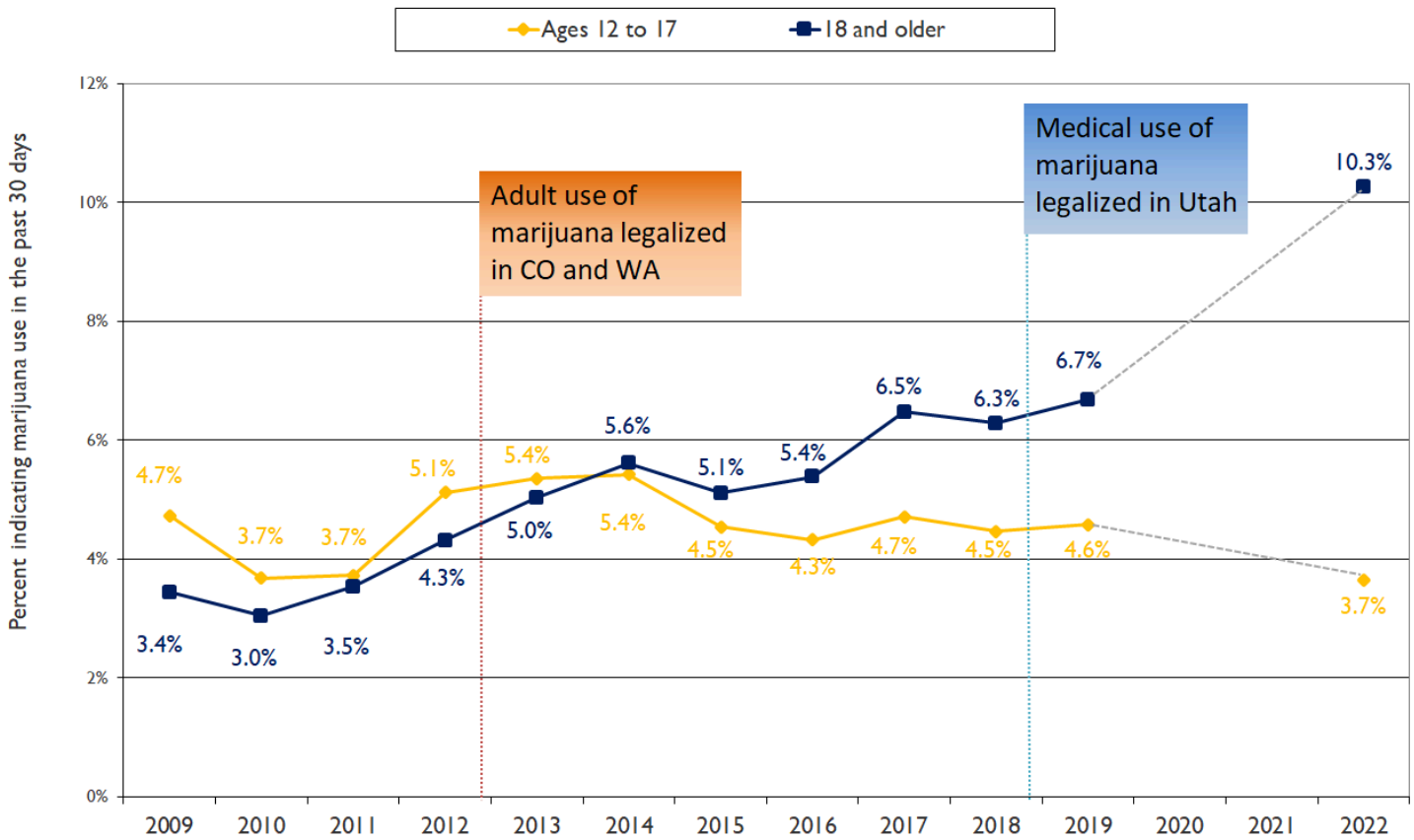
Figure 1. Past 30-day marijuana use trends ages 12 and older: Utah vs. U.S. 2009-2022 (NSDUH)



A closer look at the Utah data reveals that the increasing trend in marijuana use is primarily driven by adults 18 and older, not by youth (aged 12-17) (Figure 2). For youth, use rates peaked in 2013 and 2014 (at 5.4%), then decreased slightly, and became relatively stable from 2015-2019 (at rates near 4.5%). In 2022, the rate for Utah youth dropped to 3.7%, but comparisons between 2022 and 2019 should be made with caution.² On the contrary, for adults in Utah, marijuana use rates have maintained a steady increase since 2010 (from 3.0% in 2010 to 10.3% in 2022). While some of the increase in use by Utah adults may be attributable to (legal) medical use, the upward trend in use had clearly begun prior to the 2018 legislation that made medical marijuana legal in Utah. A deeper dive into the Utah adult data reveals that increases in use were observed for adults in both the 18-25 and 26 and older age groups, but the 18-25 age group consistently has a much higher use rate. For example, the 30-day use rate for 18-25-year-olds in Utah was 17.1%, compared to a rate of 8.8% for the 26 and older age group in 2022.

[2] Data collected prior to 2020 is not directly comparable to data collected after 2020 due to changes in the methodology of the NSDUH.

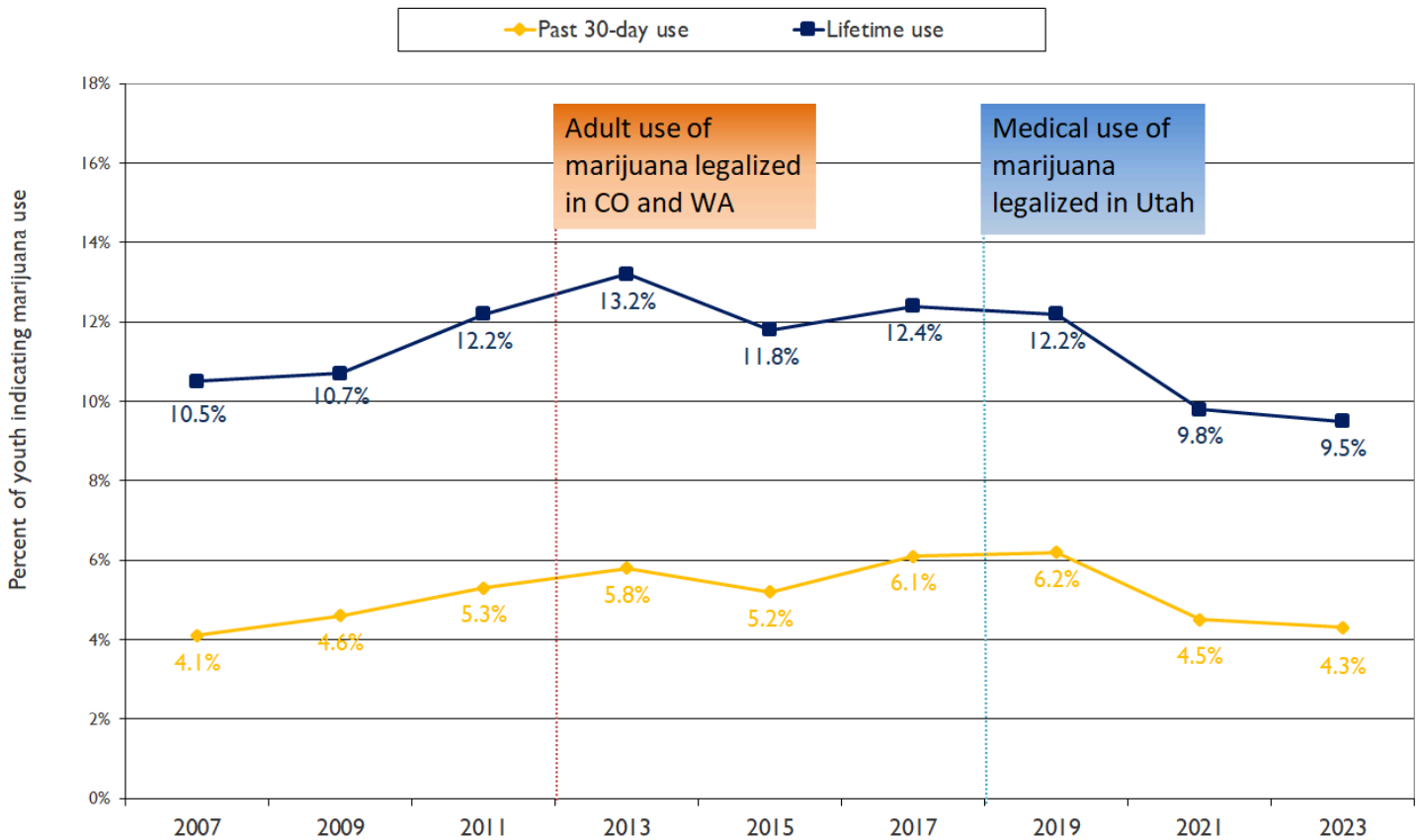
Figure 2. Utah past 30-day marijuana use trends by age 2009-2022 (NSDUH)



For youth, the Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) survey³ also provides estimates of marijuana use that are based on a much larger sample of youth than the NSDUH. According to the SHARP survey, past 30-day marijuana use rates (for grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 combined) increased from 2007 to 2019 (from 4.1% to 6.2%, respectively), with the most rapid increase in youth use observed from 2007 through 2013. This timeframe coincided with a period where public discourse about marijuana was high, as proponents for the legalization of adult marijuana use made their first successful effort for legalization in 2012 (in Colorado and Washington state). Despite this, a substantial decrease in marijuana use among Utah youth was observed in 2021, and similar rates were observed in 2023, suggesting marijuana use among Utah youth has tapered. The fact that youth marijuana rates in Utah have decreased even as a growing number of states have legalized adult use, and medical use became legal in Utah speaks to the importance and effectiveness of prevention work being implemented throughout the state to address youth marijuana use.

[3] The SHARP survey measures the health of Utah youth and the risk and protective factors that predict these health and problem behaviors in adolescents. The survey is administered across the state every other year to Utah students in grades 6 through 12.

Figure 3. Utah youth (grades 6-12 combined) marijuana use trends 2007-2023 (SHARP)



Youth marijuana use, the developing teen brain, and the relationship with other problem behaviors

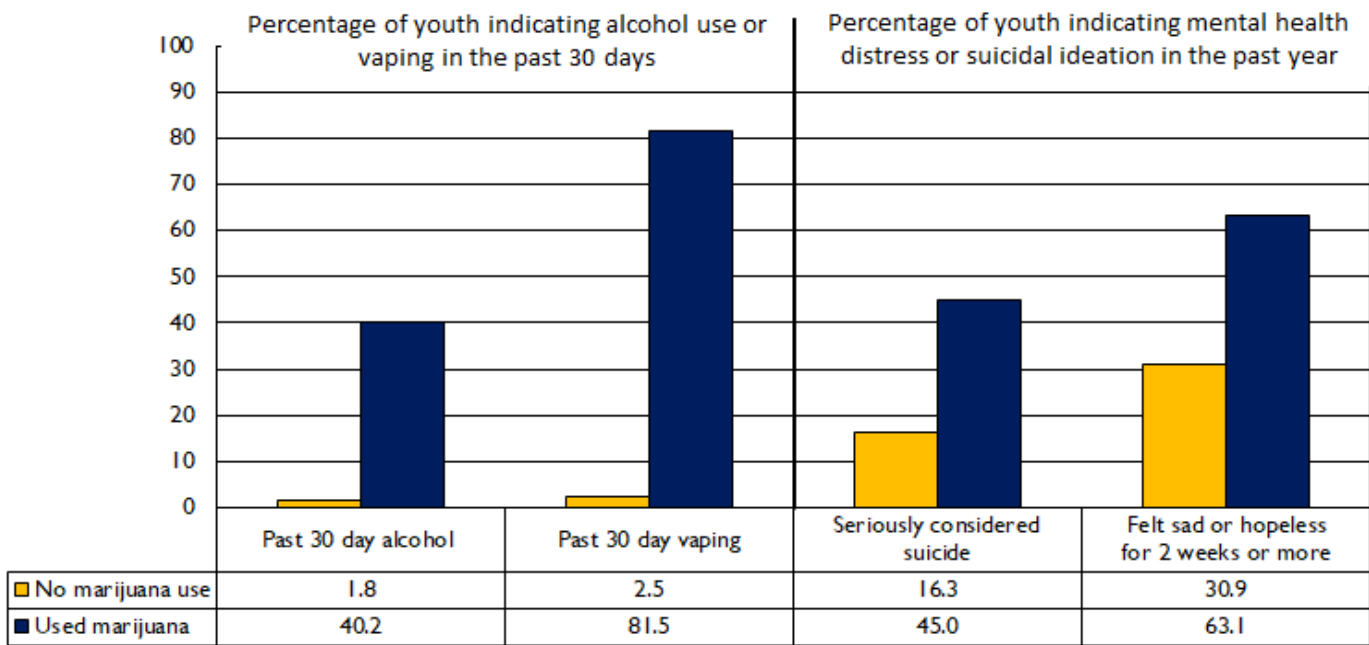
Preventing youth marijuana use is important because of the potential impact it can have on the developing teen brain. The human brain continues to develop well into an individual’s 20s, and substance use during this period of development can have lasting negative impacts.^{4 5} In regards to marijuana, researchers have identified links between youth use and a variety of negative outcomes, including increased mental health distress and suicidal ideation, deficits in attention, learning and memory, decreased school performance and attendance, and

[4] Levine, A., Clemenza, K., Rynn, M., & Lieberman, J. (2017). Evidence for the Risks and Consequences of Adolescent Cannabis Exposure. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 56(3), 214-225. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2016.12.014.

[5] Silveri MM. Adolescent brain development and underage drinking in the United States: identifying risks of alcohol use in college populations. *Harv Rev Psychiatry*. 2012 Jul-Aug;20(4):189-200. doi: 10.3109/10673229.2012.714642.

increased likelihood of using other substances.⁶ Data from the SHARP survey corroborates the relationship between youth marijuana use and other problem behaviors for Utah youth. Figure 4 presents data comparing Utah youth (in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 combined) who used marijuana in the past 30 days to youth who did not use, for the following outcomes: past 30-day alcohol use, past 30-day vaping, seriously considering suicide in the past year, and feeling sad or hopeless for at least 2 weeks in a row during the past year. Youth who had used marijuana *were much more likely* than youth who did not use, to report using other substances. In fact, youth who used marijuana were 20 times more likely to report past 30-day alcohol use (40% vs. 2%, respectively) than youth who didn't use marijuana, and were almost 30 times more likely to report past 30-day vaping (82% vs. 3%, respectively). In regards to suicidal ideation and mental health distress, youth who used marijuana were nearly four times more likely to report seriously considering suicide than those who did not (45% vs. 16%, respectively), and twice as likely to report feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in the past year (63% vs. 31%).

Figure 4. Substance use & mental health outcomes for youth who indicated past 30-day marijuana use compared to youth who did not use - Utah 2023 (SHARP)



[6] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Preventing Marijuana Use Among Youth. SAMHSA Publication No. PEP21-06-01-001. Rockville, MD: National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2021.

This data brief was prepared for the Utah State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup by Bach Harrison, LLC. Visit <https://utahprevention.org/> to learn more about prevention efforts to reduce substance abuse and misuse.