

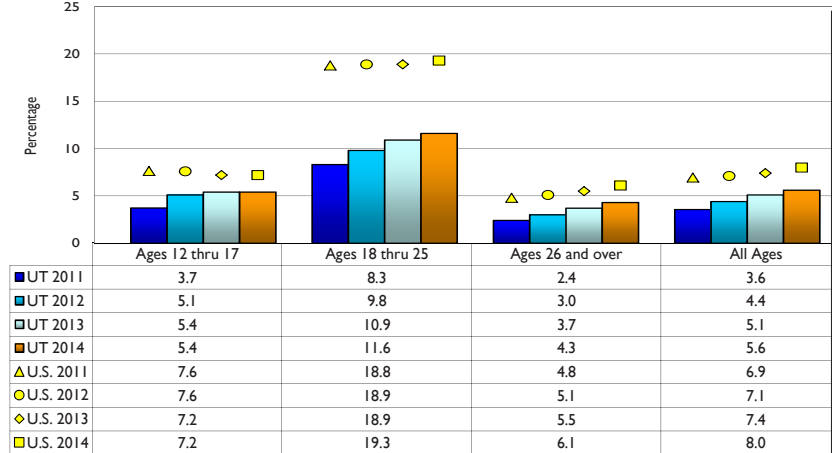


Marijuana Use Rates and Overview

Over the past several years public opinion regarding marijuana use has become increasingly favorable, and laws legalizing the recreational use of marijuana have been passed in seven states as well as the District of Columbia. Given the fact that two of these states border Utah (Colorado and Nevada), and the close proximity of three others (California, Oregon and Washington State), prevention professionals are very concerned about the secondary impacts of the legalization of recreational marijuana on Utah's marijuana use rates. Compounding the issue further are efforts within the state to legalize the medical use of marijuana.

Marijuana has historically been the illicit drug with the highest use rates both in Utah, and nationally. While marijuana use rates in Utah are low in comparison to many other states, use rates within the state have been trending upwards steadily over the past several years. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), the rate of (past 30 day) marijuana use among Utahns 12 years and older increased from 3.1% in 2009 to 5.4% in 2014. Nationally, use rates increased as well over the same time period, but at a more moderate pace, from 6.8% to 7.4%. A closer look at the Utah data suggests that the increasing trend in marijuana use over the past few years has primarily been driven by adults 18 and older rather than by youth ages 12-17 (see Figure 1). Use rates for youth have remained steady since 2012, while rates among both the 18-25 and 26+ age groups have continued to climb at a steady pace. Consistent with the youth marijuana trends observed in the NSDUH, data from the Utah Student Risk and Prevention (SHARP) also suggest that youth marijuana use may be leveling off after a prolonged upward trend. The SHARP survey revealed slight decreases in use rates among youth in all grades surveyed from 2013 to 2015 (see Figure 2) following a consistent upward trend from 2007 to 2013. While it is certainly too soon to determine whether youth marijuana use in Utah will decrease further or rebound in the future, for now it is a welcome sign that youth rates did not continue to increase in 2015.

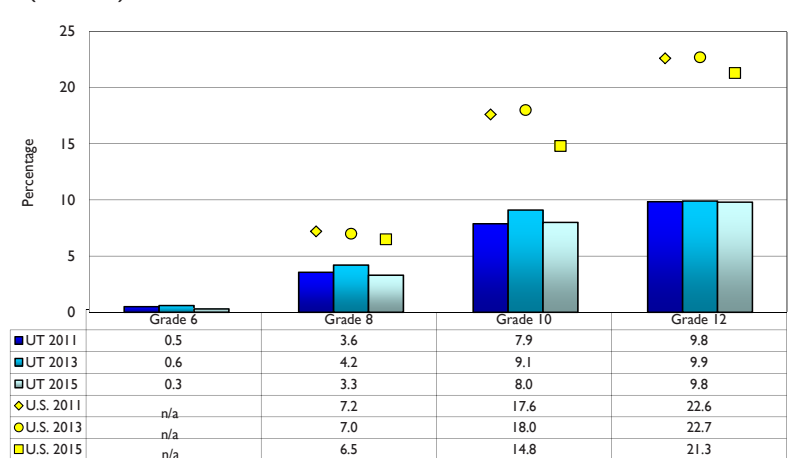
Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents Indicating Marijuana Use in the Past 30 Days, Utah vs. U.S. (2011-2014)



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health

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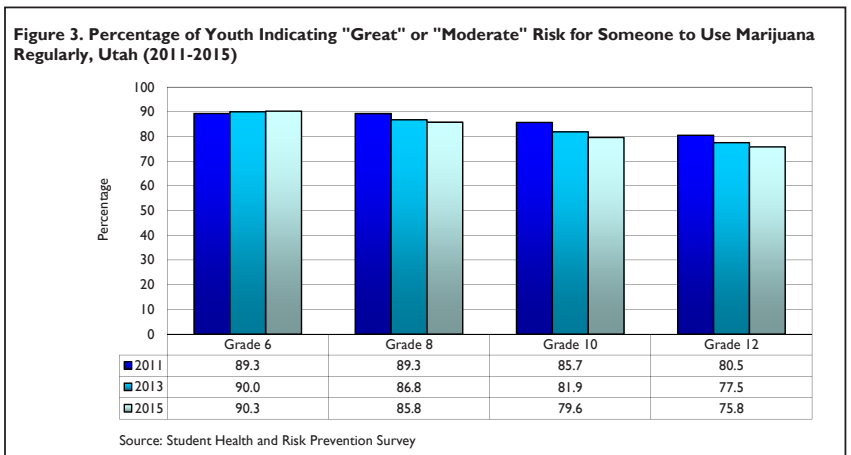
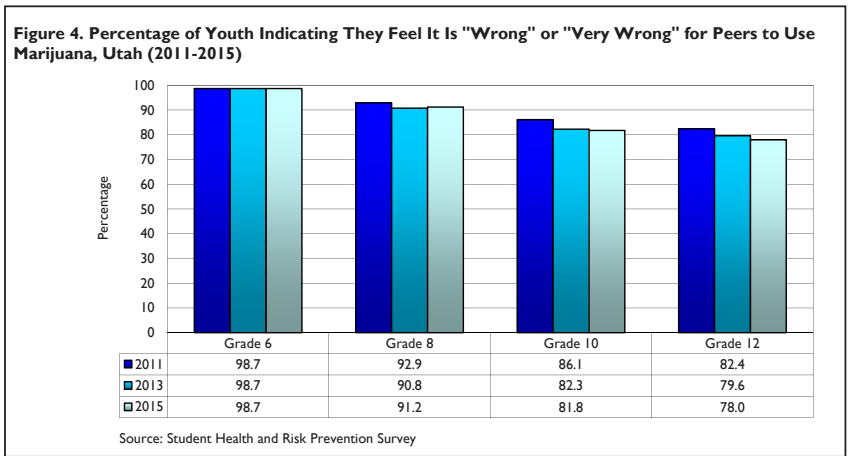
Figure 2. Percentage of Youth Indicating Any Marijuana Use in Past 30 Days by Grade, Utah vs. United States (2011-2015)



Source: Student Health and Risk Prevention Survey and Monitoring The Future
(*2013 MTF data for U.S. not yet available)

Risk Factors for Marijuana Use

Traditionally, risk factor data have been helpful for understanding the low marijuana use rates observed in Utah, and the increasing trend in use that emerged in recent years. The Utah SHARP survey contains two items that measure beliefs and attitudes about marijuana use, and these attitudes are generally predictive of actual use (i.e., as attitudes become more favorable, the likelihood of use increases). In 2015, when asked how much they felt someone risked harming themselves if they smoke marijuana regularly, 76.5% of Utah youth in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 (combined) indicated a “moderate” or “great” level of risk. When asked how wrong they felt it was for someone their age to smoke marijuana, more than 87.8% of students indicated it was “wrong” or “very wrong,” and when asked whether their parents would feel it is wrong for them to use marijuana, nearly all (97.2%) Utah youth indicated “wrong” or “very wrong.” While these data certainly provide a favorable picture of youth attitudes toward marijuana use, a close examination of the data suggests some important caveats for consideration. First, the trends in perceived risk and peer disapproval from 2007 to 2015 clearly suggest that youth have begun to perceive marijuana use to be less risky in recent years (see Figure 3). This is especially true for older students (10th and 12th graders). For example, among 12th graders 88.1% indicated regular marijuana use was risky in 2007 vs. 75.8% in 2015. A similar trend is seen for peer disapproval (87.2% of 12th graders indicated it was wrong for someone their age to use marijuana in 2007 vs. 78% in 2015). With that said, the relationship between marijuana attitudes and use appears to be more complex than initially thought. Despite the fact that attitudes toward marijuana continued to become less negative from 2013 to 2015, use rates actually showed a slight decrease rather than an increase, over that same period. This suggests that many youth are choosing not to use marijuana even though their attitudes toward it have softened.



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Concerns about the Secondary Impacts of Marijuana Legalization in Colorado and Washington State

Currently, 29 states have laws legalizing the medical use of marijuana, and seven states as well as the District of Columbia, have passed laws legalizing recreational use. In recent years, national public opinion about marijuana has changed significantly toward greater acceptance of marijuana use, both medically and recreationally. In 2012, Colorado and Washington State became the first states to pass legislation that legalized the recreational use of marijuana, spurring serious concern among substance abuse prevention professionals in Utah about the potential impact of legalized marijuana use in these states on Utah’s populace. Now, additional states within close proximity (e.g., Nevada, California, and Oregon) have passed similar laws. Given the geographical proximity of many states with legal recreational marijuana use, there is a strong possibility that the avail-

ability of marijuana in Utah will increase as marijuana purchased legally in nearby states is brought into Utah for personal use and/or illegal re-sale. Additionally, the legalization of recreational marijuana use in nearby states may accelerate the already increasing acceptance of marijuana in Utah due to perceptions that legal drugs are safer than illicit. Since the inception of legalized recreational use in Washington and Oregon in 2012, marijuana use among Utah adults continued its upward trajectory. The silver lining, thus far, is that a corresponding increase in Utah youth marijuana use has not been observed. It is important that prevention and health promotion professionals in our state remain alert to changes in attitudes and use rates as new developments continue to unfold regarding legalized marijuana use.