

Perceived and Reported Use of Marijuana and Alcohol

An Update from the 2015 Young Adult Health Survey

Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery, in collaboration with the Center for Study of Health and Risk Behaviors at the University of Washington

The Washington State Young Adult Health Survey (YAHS) is an annual online survey that measures marijuana and other substance use, risk factors, and perceptions of risk and consequences among young adults aged 18 to 25 residing in Washington State. Presented here are highlights of the alcohol- and marijuana-related findings from young adults surveyed in 2015, including notable comparisons to the cohort of young adults surveyed in 2014.

Key Findings

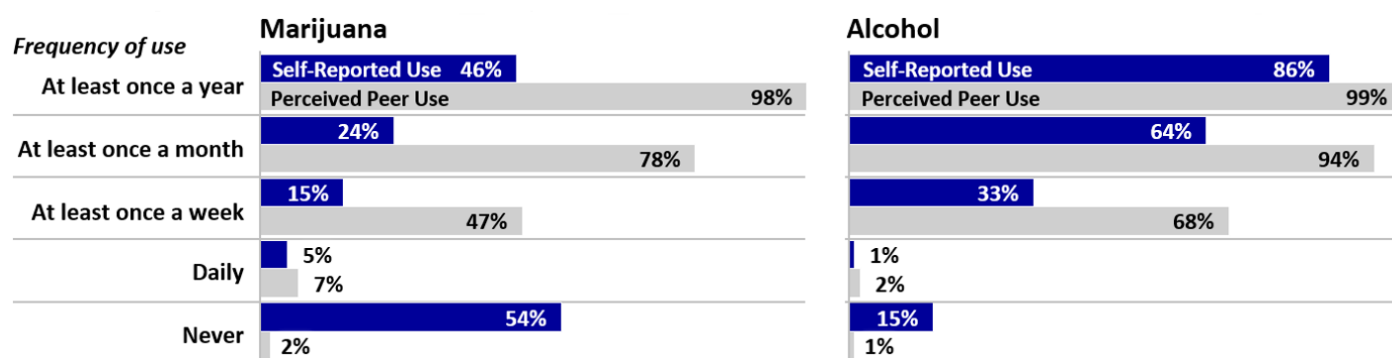
- There was no significant change in self-reported marijuana use between 2014 and 2015.
- Young adults overestimate how frequently their peers use marijuana and alcohol and underestimate the proportion who do NOT use these substances.
- Retail stores have become a major source of marijuana for those age 21 and older. However, among both underage (under 21) and legal-age (21+) young adults, the most common source of marijuana is “from friends.”

Perceived Peer Substance Use & Reported Substance Use in the Past 12 Months

There were clear differences between perceived and reported use of both marijuana and alcohol among the young adults surveyed. Young adults incorrectly believe their peers regularly use recreational marijuana and alcohol. About 47% reported that the “typical person” their age used marijuana at least once a week and about 68% said that their peers used alcohol at least once a week (Figure 1). Very few thought the “typical” young adult never used marijuana (2%) or alcohol (1%).

In contrast, the most common frequency of use reported by Washington young adults is never using recreational marijuana and using alcohol at least once a month but less than once per week. Despite fears about increased recreational marijuana availability when retail stores opened in 2014, there was little change in reported frequency of recreational marijuana use between 2014 and 2015.

Figure 1: Self-Reported Use and Perceived Peer Use of Recreational Marijuana and Alcohol



Note: Percentages based on all respondents (2015 Total=1,675)

Sources of Marijuana and Ease of Access

More than half of current marijuana users age 21 and older reported retail store purchase in 2015, compared to 7% of those under age 21 (Figure 2). This represents an increase from 2014 for both age groups. In addition, those age 21 and older less frequently reported obtaining marijuana from a dispensary, from friends, or by giving money to someone/via someone else's medical card in 2015 than in 2014. Obtaining marijuana "from friends" remains the most frequently reported mechanism for obtaining marijuana, even among legal-age young adults.

Figure 2: Source of Marijuana by Age Group

Source of marijuana	Under 21		Age 21 and over	
	2015 (TOTAL = 208)	2014 (TOTAL = 169)	2015 (TOTAL = 309)	2014 (TOTAL = 336)
From friends	76%	73%	55%	68%
Bought at a retail store – Including with fake ID	7%	1%	52%	10%
Gave money to someone or from someone with a medical card	32%	36%	16%	31%
From a medical dispensary/service	19%	14%	13%	21%
At a party	22%	23%	11%	12%
From a family member – Sibling, parents with permission, other family	9%	9%	10%	14%
Grew it themselves	1%	2%	3%	2%
Other – Stole, parents without permission, other	7%	12%	7%	7%

Note: Percentages based on current users; question asked only of those reporting current (30-day) use. Respondents could select multiple options.

Figure 3: Perceived Ease of Access

Very easy to obtain?

Marijuana	18-20	45%
	21-25	60%
Alcohol	18-20	49%
	21-25	89%

Note: Percentages based on all respondents (2015 Total=1,675)

More young adults over 21, the age to legally purchase recreational marijuana, perceived marijuana to be very easy to obtain than those under 21 (Figure 3). The age difference for alcohol was much larger; nearly all of those over age 21 said it is very easy to access alcohol. While perceived ease in accessing alcohol did not change between 2014 and 2015, it did for marijuana. The percentage perceiving very easy access increased among legal-age young adults, while it decreased among 18-20 year olds.

About the Young Adult Health Survey (YAHS)

Following the passage of Initiative 502 in 2012, the first wave of the survey began in 2014 before the recreational marijuana stores opened; a non-random sample of 2,101 eligible young adults from 36 of 39 counties and all racial/ethnic groups participated in Cohort 1. The survey was fielded again in spring/summer 2015, with a new sample of 1,675 young adults comprising Cohort 2. While other available data on substance use among 18-25 year olds is largely limited to college students, the YAHS was designed to learn about marijuana use among a broader population. The results presented here are weighted to reflect the demographic and geographic characteristics of Washington's young adult population and the results are largely similar to estimates from surveys using other methodological approaches. While the YAHS survey relies on a non-random sample, the online survey strategy is likely to better reach marginalized groups, who tend to have higher rates of substance use, than telephone- or address-based sampling strategies.