Marijuana Use among College Students
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The rates of marijuana use have been increasing among college students in the United States since the mid-1990s. Several studies have shown that marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug among this age group with approximately 25% of college students using marijuana within the past year (Bell, Wechsler, & Johnston, 1997). Ultimately, with one-fourth of college students using marijuana, universities are seeing increases in tobacco use, binge drinking, illicit drug use, and violence.

For over a decade, researchers have noted that the use of marijuana among college students is steadily increasing. Researchers completing a longitudinal study segregated marijuana users into two groups, past 30-day and past-year users. The percentage of past 30-day marijuana users increased from 13% in 1993 to 17% in 2001 while, the past-year marijuana users rose from 23% in 1993 to 30% in 2001 (The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention, 2008).

College can be a time where parental surveillance is at an all time low and where young adults experiment with high risk behaviors before having to face the responsibilities of adulthood. About 33% of college student marijuana users reported that they first experimented with the substance when they were 18 years or older (Gledhill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, & Wechsler, 2000). One study focused on marijuana use with first year college students and found that marijuana involvement was the highest in freshman year and then declined with each year following. The highest use of marijuana levels were reported at the beginning or end of the academic year, proving that when weather is of warmer temperatures and enforcement is not as intense, it becomes an ideal time for college students to use (Dierker et al., 2000).

A recent study conducted at the University of Maryland College Park focused on marijuana use with first year college students. Researchers found that one in ten incoming freshman were considered, by clinical definition, to have a cannabis use disorder. Another concern, first year students who use marijuana five or more times over the past year reported concentration problems (40.1%), regularly putting themselves in danger (24.3%), driving after using marijuana (18.6%), and oversleeping therefore missing class (14%) (Caldeira et al., 2008).

Marijuana users are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, fatigue, and low motivation. A strong association of mental health concerns correlates with more frequent users. College aged women are most affected by depression and anxiety when using marijuana; with women who are daily users having the highest risk (Patton et al., 2002).
The effects of marijuana use to the human brain can be accompanied with severe impairment of brain functions. Even acute usage of marijuana has been found to affect cognitive abilities such as executive control, decision making, and goal directed behaviors. Researchers observed brain activity before, after, and during marijuana use and concluded the brain was severely disrupted 20-40 minutes upon marijuana use. Researchers concluded the resemblance of the disruption in the brain with patients that have suffered from lateral prefrontal cortex lesions. (Howard & Menkes, 2009).

Further studies looked into marijuana as a gateway drug and it was reported that 91% of the college student marijuana users are regularly involved with heavy drinking or cigarette smoking (Gledhill-Hoyt et al., 2000). The mixture of alcohol and marijuana poses negative consequences such as decreased academic performance, violence, vandalism, acquaintance rape, and unprotected sex (Martindale, 2004).

A recent study was completed in 2010 by researchers focusing their population to adolescent marijuana users. Of the large sample which was 615 high school aged students, the mean age of the participants was 17. Researchers found that marijuana use was significantly related to delinquent behaviors such as fighting, shoplifting, vandalism, and carrying a knife or gun. These behaviors were defined using the Antisocial Behavior Scales (Chabrol et al., 2010).

One group of researchers focused their studies on violence and marijuana use and what caused the relationship. They measured different levels aggression along with different amounts of THC, a psychoactive substance present in marijuana. The researchers found that the more THC present, the more aggressive tendencies were reported (Moore & Stuart, 2003).

It can often be difficult to generalize characteristics of marijuana users. Studies have characterized the majority of college student marijuana users with being single, Caucasian, spending more time at parties and socializing with friends. These students will often spend less time studying than non-users and were less likely to be involved in protective factors, such as religious/spiritual affiliations or involvement in community service (Bell et al., 1997).

Students using marijuana who live in co-educational dormitories or have five or more close friends were 1.41 times more likely to use marijuana than those who lived in a same sex dormitory or had fewer than five friends. In addition, students who had less than a 2.0 grade point average were 1.46 more likely to use marijuana than students who had a grade point average of 3.0 or higher (Bell et al., 1997).

Studying marijuana use at different universities in the United States allowed researchers to characterize higher education institutions that are more susceptible to students using marijuana, though data has confirmed the increase of marijuana use across the majority of U.S. college campuses. Predominantly, larger size schools (enrollment of at least 10,000), rural areas, co-educational populations, located in the northeast of the U.S., and the presence of an alcohol establishment on campus are all factors for
concern (Bell et al., 1997). Along the same northeastern region, a study focused on three northwestern college campuses and found that on average, 69% of students reported to use marijuana at least one day per month during the past three months (Kilmer et al., 2006).

**Recommendations**

- Increased focus on particularly freshman students should be implicated. Brief assessments and surveys could provide universities focus and direction for effective preventative activities.
- Higher education institutions must introduce drug prevention programs to primarily freshman students in order to decrease the negative effects and dangerous situations that first year marijuana students have reported.
- Universities should consider brief screening assessments for students seeking counseling in order to address a marijuana dependency problem.
- Universities that introduce promote, and market protective factors (i.e. religious activities, community service) for students, will be more likely to have lower rates of student marijuana users.
- Resident staff must be aware that students have five or more friends and a 2.0 or less grade point average are more likely to use marijuana.

Marijuana use among college students has grown steadily each year over the past decade. Consequences of using can be harmful to young adults and has an effect on their health and well being later in life. Studies have reported that marijuana users are more likely to become violent, smoke cigarettes, have less cognitive abilities, and have lower grade point averages, compared to college students that do not use marijuana. University officials must be aware of this growing trend and implement prevention and intervention programs to students. Further studies will be required to confirm how segmenting different groups among college students while implementing substance abuse programs affects the overall rates of college student marijuana users.
Disclaimer: The views of the author do not necessarily reflect the views and beliefs of the Illinois Higher Education Center, Eastern Illinois University, and The Department of Human Services.

References


