

National anti-drug campaign succeeds in lowering marijuana use, study suggests

February 22 2011, by Jeff Grabmeier

The federal anti-drug campaign "Above the Influence" appears to have effectively reduced marijuana use by teenagers, new research shows.

A study of more than 3,000 students in 20 communities nationwide found that by the end of 8th grade, 12 percent of those who had not reported having seen the campaign took up [marijuana](#) use compared to only 8 percent among students who had reported familiarity with the campaign.

The researchers said they believe this is the first independent study to find evidence for the effectiveness of the "Above the Influence" campaign, which was initially funded at nearly \$200 million a year when it began in 2005.

Evidence for the success of "Above the Influence" is especially heartening because the primary independent evaluation of its predecessor campaign, "My Anti-Drug", showed no evidence for success, said Michael Slater, principal investigator of the new study and professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"The 'Above the Influence' campaign appears to be successful because it taps into the desire by teenagers to be independent and self-sufficient," Slater said.

For example, one television ad in the campaign ends with the line "Getting messed up is just another way of leaving yourself behind."

Campaigns that only emphasize the risk of drug use may not be effective with many teens.

"We know that many teenagers are not risk avoidant, and consider the risks of marijuana to be modest. A campaign that merely emphasizes already-familiar risks of marijuana probably won't reach the teens who are most likely to experiment with drugs," he said.

The study appears in the March 2011 issue of the journal *Prevention Science*.

Slater said this study was not originally designed to study the effectiveness of the "Above the Influence" campaign, which is sponsored by the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP).

Instead, the study was going to examine the effectiveness of a very similar, but more localized anti-drug campaign called "Be Under Your Own Influence." This theme was developed years before the "Above the Influence" campaign by study co-author Kathleen Kelly, professor of marketing at Colorado State University.

It involved in-school media and promotional materials combined with community-based efforts. Like the "Above the Influence" campaign, it emphasized that [drug use](#) undermines the ability of teens to achieve their goals and act independently.

Slater said that members of his research team presented preliminary results supporting the effectiveness of "Be Under Your Own Influence" to the ONDCP and to Partnership for Drug Free America, which oversees creative efforts for the national campaign, in 2003, about two years before "Above the Influence" was launched. However, the researchers did not have any direct input into the development of the

"Above the Influence" campaign.

Slater said the approaches are very similar.

"'Above the Influence' uses the same approach — focusing on the inconsistency of substance use with teens' aspirations and autonomy — that we developed," he said.

A study published in 2006 of "Be Under Your Own Influence" showed that it reduced by about half the number of students who began using marijuana and alcohol during the two years of the project, compared to students in communities without the program.

This new study was designed to replicate and extend the previous research, Slater said. In the 20 communities involved in the study, schools received some combination of some, all or none of the "Be Under Your Own Influence" materials.

The researchers surveyed 3,236 students who were about 12 years old when the study began in 2005. They were surveyed four times beginning in 7th grade and ending about a year and a half later.

The researchers didn't know that the ONDCP would be launching its "Above the Influence" campaign about the same time this new study began. As a result, though, the researchers asked students about their exposure to the national campaign during the second through fourth surveys.

The results of this study showed that the ONDCP campaign appeared to be very successful at reaching students: up to 79 percent of students surveyed said they had seen the ads.

"There was wide exposure to the national campaign, and it really

swamped the effects of our local effort," Slater said. "It took over, and we didn't see any independent effects for the 'Be Under Your Own Influence' campaign."

But it was really the message of "Above the Influence" that mattered in reducing marijuana use – not the fact that it was a national campaign, he said. In their previous study, the researchers found that "Be Under Your Own Influence" showed strong local anti-drug effects, even though the national "My Anti-Drug" campaign was going on.

"'Above the Influence' has succeeded more than its predecessor attempt to influence teens," Slater said.

The effectiveness of the ONDCP campaign can be seen in the way it appeared to influence attitudes of teens who viewed the ads.

Results showed that teens who had seen the "Above the Influence" ads were more likely than others to say that marijuana use was inconsistent with being autonomous and independent and that it would interfere with their goals and aspirations.

"The teens seemed to pick up on the messages that the campaign promoted," Slater said.

"The campaign really works to honor teens' interest in becoming autonomous and achieving goals and stays away from messages that don't really reach the teens who are most likely to use marijuana."

Slater says study limitations include the fact that findings regarding the ONDCP campaign were based on survey results and not a randomized, experimental design in which some youth saw the ONDCP campaign and others did not. Another limitation was that the study, while taking place in 20 communities around the U.S., did not use a random sample

of U.S. youth.

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: National anti-drug campaign succeeds in lowering marijuana use, study suggests (2011, February 22) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-02-national-anti-drug-campaign-lowering-marijuana.html>

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