

Majority of high school seniors favor more liberal marijuana policies, study says

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The United States is undergoing a drastic change in marijuana policy. Two states legalized recreational use for adults in 2012, and next week, citizens of Oregon, Alaska and the District of Columbia will vote for or against legalization in their area. The majority of the public now favor legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana use, but there is a lack of research examining how marijuana use and demographic characteristics relate to positions toward specific marijuana policies. For example, is it primarily marijuana users who support legalization?

There is a need to examine positions toward legalization, particularly among those who are at the highest risk for initiation—adolescents approaching adulthood. With public opinion tending to drive policy in the US, an analysis of such positions is important as these adolescents are (or soon will be) of age to vote and perhaps influence marijuana policy.

Joseph J. Palamar, PhD, MPH, a researcher affiliated with New York University's Center for Drug Use and HIV Research (CDUHR), conducted a study analyzing adolescents' positions toward marijuana decriminalization and legalization. In his analysis, now in the on-line edition of the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Palamar identifies how positions toward various marijuana policies differ by gender, race, political affiliation and religion. He also examined how lifetime and recent marijuana use relate to such positions.

The study, "An Examination of Opinions toward Marijuana Policies

among High School Seniors in the United States," used data from Monitoring the Future (MTF), a nation-wide ongoing annual study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American secondary school students. The MTF survey is administered in approximately 130 public and private schools throughout 48 states in the US. Roughly 15,000 [high school seniors](#) are assessed annually.

Dr. Palamar's study examined data from 11,594 students who were asked a variety of questions to gauge their attitudes towards marijuana use and policy from 2007-2011. Newer (2012) data were not analyzed because two states legalized recreational use after 2011. Dr. Palamar is also an assistant professor of population health at NYU's Langone Medical Center.

The survey found that the majority of high school seniors were in favor of more liberal marijuana policies, with 33% responding that marijuana should be entirely legal, and 28.5% answering it should be treated as a minor violation. Of those remaining, 25.6% felt that it should be a crime and 12.9% were unsure. With regard to who should be able to purchase marijuana (if legal), 29.2% said no one, 48.0% felt only adults should be able to purchase; 10.4% felt anyone should be able to purchase and 12.4% were unsure.

Upon analyzing the responses, Dr. Palamar found that females were significantly less likely to respond that marijuana should be legal, with only 26.7% of females surveyed in favor of legalization, compared to 39.2% of males. Furthermore, females were less likely to respond that marijuana, if legal, should only be sold to adults.

When compared with white students, those who identified as black or Hispanic were more likely to support more liberal marijuana policies.

"Studies suggest that blacks and Hispanics are less likely to use illicit

drugs such as marijuana, yet arrest and incarceration rates for drug possession tend to be higher for these subgroups," said Dr. Palamar. "Higher arrest rates may be due to the fact that minorities are more likely to engage in riskier practices such as using or purchasing on the street. These results are important as they show that even though blacks and Hispanics tend to use marijuana and other illicit drugs at lower rates than whites, they are more likely to support legalization."

Dr. Palamar also noted findings with regard to whether or not one resides in a city (metropolitan statistical area). Those residing in a small or large city were more likely to favor legalization and treating use as a violation, when compared to those residing in non-urban areas. Palamar mentions that big cities tend to have higher rates of marijuana use and thus there may be higher exposure to marijuana users than in non-urban areas, and cites this as a rationale for these findings.

Social stigma toward marijuana use appears to have a significant influence on adolescents' views. 39.5% of those whose friends disapproved of marijuana use said it should be a crime, compared to the 10.7% of those whose friends did not disapprove of marijuana use. Likewise, the majority of students who identified as highly religious were at low odds for supporting more liberal policies. However, almost half (47.4%) of them said they were in favor of either legalization or treating marijuana use as a violation. According to Palamar,

"This may be because marijuana use is becoming seen as less of a moral issue," notes Palamar, "because findings from a recent Pew national survey showed that in 2013, only 32% of adults in the US felt use was morally "wrong," compared to 50% in 2006."

Trends were also attributed to the level of education students' parents had attained; those with high parent educational attainment were more likely to support legalization, when compared to those with parents of

low educational attainment.

Political Affiliation's Impact

Unsurprisingly, political affiliation tended to be strongly associated with positions toward legalization. Conservatives were consistently against legalization and decriminalization, and liberals were consistently at higher odds for supporting more liberal policies. However, while conservatives were less likely to support marijuana being sold to anyone or only adults, both liberals and moderates were more likely to support marijuana only being sold to adults and were less likely to favor sales to anyone. This implies that these groups tend to support legalization, but with age regulation.

"There are a lot of misperceptions regarding the term 'legalization,'" said Dr. Palamar. "A lot of people think that 'legalization' means anyone can purchase or sell the drug and that the drug will be freely available on shelves at your nearest store. But that is absolutely not the case. Legalization comes with strict regulation. Future studies and polls need to adequately define the meaning of legalization."

The survey also assessed previous substance use

The study found that students who smoked cigarettes or used alcohol were more likely to favor marijuana legalization or treating its use as a violation. Obliquely, students who have smoked cigarettes or used alcohol were more likely to report that marijuana, if legal, should be sold only to adults. The study found not only more recent, but more frequent, marijuana use to be "robustly" associated with support for each form of legalization assessed. Incidentally, 7.1% of lifetime marijuana users felt that marijuana use should be a crime, while 16.7% and 27.1% of non-lifetime users felt that use should be legal or a violation, respectively.

Likewise, 17.7% of lifetime users felt that if legal, marijuana should be sold to no one, and 38.5% of non-lifetime users felt marijuana, if legal, should be sold to adults.

"These findings actually break some common misconceptions regarding support for marijuana legalization," said Dr. Palamar. "Not all marijuana users support legalization, and a large percentage of those who have never used marijuana now support more liberal policies. So support for legalization doesn't necessarily mean that one wants to go out and smoke a legal joint. It might instead mean that he or she supports liberty, increased tax revenues, or a reduction in the black market and associated crime. Other individuals feel legalization may reduce access to youth and make the drug more difficult to obtain, similar to alcohol."

Dr. Palamar's study proves unique, as it utilized national data to examine positions toward various forms of legalization, and assessed positions towards a specific user control—age-restricted access. Palamar urges that research continue to examine positions towards [marijuana](#) policy, as public opinion is a driving factor of policy and opinions may also predict future use.

Provided by New York University

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