

Suspension leads to more pot use among teens, study finds

March 20 2015, by Deborah Bach

Suspending kids from school for using marijuana is likely to lead to more—not less—pot use among their classmates, a new study finds.

Counseling was found to be a much more effective means of combating marijuana use. And while enforcement of anti-drug policies is a key factor in whether teens use marijuana, the way schools respond to policy violators matters greatly.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Washington and in Australia, compared drug policies at schools in Washington state and Victoria, Australia, to determine how they impacted student marijuana use.

The results startled researchers: Students attending schools with suspension policies for illicit drug use were 1.6 times more likely than their peers at schools without such policies to use marijuana in the next year—and that was the case with the student body as a whole, not just those who were suspended.

"That was surprising to us," said co-author Richard Catalano, professor of [social work](#) and co-founder of the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. "It means that suspensions are certainly not having a deterrent effect. It's just the opposite."

By contrast, the study found that [students](#) attending schools with policies

of referring pot-using students to a [school](#) counselor were almost 50 percent less likely to use marijuana. Other ways of responding to policy violators—sending them to educational programs, referring them to a school counselor or nurse, expelling them or calling the police—were found to have no significant impact on marijuana use.

The results were published online March 19 in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Data for the research come from the International Youth Development Study, a long-term initiative started in 2002 to examine behaviors among young people in Washington and Victoria. The two states were chosen since they are similar in size and demographics, but differ considerably in their approaches to drug use among students. Washington schools are more likely to suspend students, call police or require offenders to attend education or cessation programs, the researchers note, while Victoria schools emphasize a harm-reduction approach that favors counseling.

Researchers surveyed more than 3,200 seventh- and ninth-graders and nearly 200 school administrators in both 2002 and 2003. Students were asked about their use of marijuana, alcohol and cigarettes and also about their schools' drug policies and enforcement. In both survey years, pot use was higher among Washington students than those in Victoria—almost 12 percent of Washington ninth-graders had used marijuana in the past month, compared with just over 9 percent of Victoria ninth-graders.

The researchers were initially most interested in teens' use of alcohol and cigarettes, Catalano said. But after Washington legalized recreational marijuana use for adults in 2012, researchers decided to take a closer look at the data to determine how legalization might influence students in Washington versus their counterparts in Australia, where pot remains illegal.

Tracy Evans-Whipp, the study's lead author, said though the policies and marijuana use studied predate marijuana legalization in Washington, the findings provide useful insights about what types of school policies are most effective in steering teens away from the drug.

"Cross-national similarities in our findings suggest that school policy impacts on student marijuana use are unlikely to change, despite Washington legalizing marijuana," said Evans-Whipp, research fellow at the Centre for Adolescent Health and Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Victoria.

Research has shown a consistent link between increased access to marijuana and higher rates of self-reported use by adolescents, the study notes. In Washington and Colorado, where recreational marijuana use by adults was also legalized in 2012, school systems have new responsibilities to adequately educate students about marijuana and respond effectively when teens are caught using it, Catalano said.

"To reduce [marijuana](#) use among all students, we need to ensure that schools are using drug policies that respond to [policy](#) violations by educating or counseling students, not just penalizing them," he said.

More information: Study: [ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/ ... 105/AJPH.2014.302421](http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.1093/ajph.2014.302421)

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