

Increase in discipline referrals for substance use in Oregon middle schools after recreational marijuana legalized

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A recent study has found that Oregon middle school students received office discipline referrals (ODRs) for substance use offenses 30% more

often after legalization of recreational marijuana relative to comparison schools in other states over the same period (school years 2012/2013–2018/2019). There were no statistically discernable changes in high school ODRs. Recreational use by adults was legalized in Oregon in 2015.

Researchers examined the extent to which legalization of recreational marijuana is linked to the number of middle and [high school students](#) who are caught in possession of marijuana in schools, as well as the impact of having marijuana outlets within walkable distances of schools.

They used [school](#) records on ODRs for offenses related to substances other than tobacco and alcohol. They compared the change in substance use ODRs in Oregon schools before and after legalization of marijuana for adult [recreational use](#) with matched comparison schools. The comparison schools were selected from states that legalized marijuana after the study period.

Results of this study, led by Gulcan Cil, Ph.D., of Oregon Research Institute and the Center for Evidence-based Policy at Oregon Health Science University, were published in the journal [Health Economics](#) on October 6, 2023.

"These findings can guide future prevention efforts," noted Dr. Cil, "because they suggest a stronger association between marijuana legalization and use at school for early adolescents, who are at a critical developmental stage regarding possible negative neurobiological consequences from marijuana use, and also at a higher risk for future transition to dependence."

Interestingly, the legalization-associated changes in substance use ODRs in Oregon [middle schools](#) were observed only in schools with a marijuana outlet within a one-mile radius. This finding is in line with

previous research indicating that presence and proximity of marijuana outlets are related to higher rates of marijuana use among youth and lower age of initiation of marijuana use.

While previous research documented that statewide legalization of marijuana and retail availability are related to increased youth marijuana use, no studies have established how this trend translates into an issue within the education system. Potential adverse impact on adolescents and investments in school-based prevention programs could be important considerations for policymakers and public health officials in their policy decisions related to marijuana.

"Personnel in schools with nearby recreational marijuana outlets may want to proactively monitor student [marijuana](#) use. At the state level, lawmakers and state agency leaders may consider expansion of school-based programs to monitor and prevent substance use, as well as policies limiting outlets near schools," Dr. Cil added.

Marijuana use in adolescence has been linked to negative health and social consequences, including academic problems, mental health issues, and impaired driving. Given these possible health and social consequences, policymakers need a broader understanding of the scope of impact of [marijuana legalization](#) to inform more effective policy.

More information: Gulcan Cil et al, Legalization and retail availability of recreational marijuana and adolescent use in schools, *Health Economics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/hec.4763](https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.4763)

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