

Cannabis legalization and rising sales have not contributed to increase in substance abuse, study finds

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The results of a new study, utilizing the most recent data on adolescent substance use to evaluate the effect of recreational cannabis legalization

and retail sales on youth's use of cannabis, tobacco, and alcohol, [appear](#) in *JAMA Pediatrics*.

The study authors—co-principal investigators Rebekah Levine Coley, a Lynch School of Education and Human Development professor; School of Social Work Professor Summer Sherburne Hawkins; and Christopher F. Baum, chair of the Economics Department—are among the first to evaluate associations between [recreational cannabis](#) legislation and recreational cannabis retail sales through 2021.

"Although studies of early-enacting states and Canada reported few effects of recreational cannabis legislation on [adolescent substance abuse](#), experts have highlighted the need to further assess policy outcomes in youth as legislation and retail availability spread, and other policies targeting youth substance use shift," the authors said. "We found limited associations between recreational cannabis legalization and retail sales with adolescent substance use, extending previous findings."

Since 2012, 24 states and Washington, D.C. have enacted recreational cannabis legislation, and 18 states have implemented recreational cannabis sales.

According to the researchers, recreational cannabis legalization was associated with modest decreases in cannabis, alcohol, and e-cigarette use, while [retail sales](#) were associated with lower e-cigarette use, and a lower likelihood, but also increased frequency of cannabis use among youth consumers, leading to no overall change in cannabis use.

"The results suggest that legalization and greater control over cannabis markets have not facilitated adolescents' entry into substance use," noted the study co-authors.

The researchers analyzed data from nearly 900,000 [high school students](#)

in 47 states over a 10-year period between 2011-2021.

According to the Pew Research Center, 54% of Americans live in a state where the recreational use of marijuana is legal, while 74% of Americans live in a state where marijuana is legal for either recreational or medical use. Also, 79% of Americans live in a county with at least one cannabis dispensary; as of February 2024, there are nearly 15,000 dispensaries operating in the U.S.

Researchers who contributed to the study included Naoka Carey, a doctoral candidate in the Applied Developmental and Educational Psychology department of the Lynch School; and Claudia Kruzik, a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Maryland-College Park.

More information: Rebekah Levine Coley et al, Recreational Cannabis Legalization, Retail Sales, and Adolescent Substance Use Through 2021, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.0555](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.0555)

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