



Commentary

The Importance of Restricting Youth Access to Marijuana in the Age of Legalization: Lessons Learned From Tobacco Control Efforts and COVID-19 Restrictions

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After a year of uncertainty regarding the effects of COVID-19 on youth substance use, the data are starting to come in and the picture is less dire than anticipated. Undoubtedly, young people with significant individual and family risk factors—such as high levels of emotional distress, anxiety, or financial strain—struggled this year both in terms of their mental health and substance use [1,2]. Still, use of the two most commonly used addictive substances by young people, e-cigarettes and alcohol, appears to have declined [3,4] among adolescents and college students during the course of stay-at-home orders in the U.S., even as the use of tobacco, alcohol, opioids, and other drugs increased among adults [5].

Although multiple factors likely contributed to the apparent decline in youth substance use during the pandemic, including heightened parental supervision, less peer contact [6], and fewer social engagements in which young people typically use substances [4], one notable finding from recent research is that reduced physical access to substances was significantly associated with lower rates of use [7]. This finding, unique to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic, in which retail outlets and social venues were closed or operating under considerable restrictions, is important to consider as growing numbers of states move toward marijuana legalization. States considering or implementing recreational marijuana laws acknowledge the potential adverse effects of legalization on youth; however, concerns about protecting youth from being exposed to and accessing the drug in states where it becomes legal and inevitably commercialized tend to be eclipsed by arguments in favor of commercialization.

At this juncture in the country's movement toward legalization, it behooves us to reflect upon lessons we learned from tobacco control efforts regarding what helps to protect youth from legal substances that are harmful to their health. Of all the prevention efforts employed, including those by parents, schools,

and media campaigns—all of which were undeniably critical—the tide in youth smoking distinctly turned when policies were put in place and enforced to restrict their exposure and access to tobacco products.

State and local policies that reduced youth exposure and access to tobacco products through higher minimum age laws, indoor and outdoor clean air laws, restrictions on advertising and promotion, tax increases, and better oversight and enforcement of retail outlets effectively altered youth's tobacco-related attitudes and behaviors, reversing decades of high smoking rates [8]. That is, before the advent of vaping. The recent youth vaping epidemic underscores how those successes were undermined by the unrestricted marketing and promotion of e-cigarette products that made them readily available and appealing to young people [9]. Conversely, the exponential growth in youth vaping only began to steady and finally wane in the past 2 years once governments began to impose more restrictive regulations to help curb youth exposure and access to e-cigarette products.

With marijuana legalization spreading throughout the country, we must look to prior experience and acknowledge that unfettered access to an addictive substance that appeals to young people will end up causing harm. Although states that have or are considering legalizing recreational marijuana typically include provisions to protect youth in their laws, most of these provisions are not up to the task. Restricting youth exposure and access to marijuana must be a deliberate and essential element of any legalization law, not an afterthought.

The advertising, promotion, and sale of marijuana should have at least the same restrictions as those imposed on cigarettes, including being prohibited near locations frequented by young people and on entertainment, print, and social media outlets that can be seen by youth. Marketing of marijuana products that targets young people, including colorful packaging, child-oriented product names, enticing flavors, and edibles that resemble candy, soda, and other treats commonly consumed by children should be banned. Labels should be required to indicate clearly that the product contains marijuana, along with accurate

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descriptions of the dose of tetrahydrocannabinol and all other ingredients. Packages should provide clear warnings regarding the danger to children of ingesting marijuana and should be child-resistant. And home delivery of marijuana products should be prohibited, as it is for cigarettes and, more recently, e-cigarette products [10]; such services can facilitate underage purchase and use and was one exception to the reduced access that protected youth from using marijuana during the pandemic [7].

Finally, policymakers should consider taking another lesson from recent tobacco control efforts that seek to restrict nicotine levels in tobacco products to less addictive levels by restricting the tetrahydrocannabinol dose in marijuana products, which have increased dramatically over the past two decades [11]. This would help to reduce the addictive potential of marijuana products for youth, as well as the risk of poisoning among children who access and ingest them.

None of this is to minimize the important influence of evidence-based school and community prevention programs and parent interventions on preventing youth marijuana and other substance use. However, the tendency to put all the emphasis on parents and schools to protect children underestimates the considerable power of the commercialization of addictive products to promote use among youth and the very real effects that policies restricting industry access to youth can have on prevention.

With growing calls to legalize marijuana, we must learn from our past mistakes and successes with other legal addictive substances, like nicotine. In the U.S., the legalization of an addictive substance is inextricably linked to its commercialization and to its consequent effects on youth perceptions of safety, marketing to youth, and rates of addiction and other health problems. State governments that have or are considering liberalizing their marijuana laws should ensure that

protecting young people remains the highest priority despite the flurry of wishful thinking about the benefits of marijuana legalization and commercialization.

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