

Legalized Marijuana Boosts High School Dropout Rates

Fran Lowry | October 20, 2016

Legalizing medical marijuana may have an adverse effect on educational attainment, new research shows.

A study examining the impact of laws that legalize marijuana on educational attainment shows that states with these laws had an increase in the high-school dropout rate among 12th graders.

In addition, among those who did graduate from high school, fewer went on to attend college or to graduate from college.

The study was [published online](#) October 11 in *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*.

Direct Link

"More than anything, what we have done is provided good, solid evidence that there is a direct link between marijuana policies and education," lead author Andrew Plunk, PhD, from Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk, told *Medscape Medical News*.

"With these policy changes, we need to be mindful about how young people might view marijuana. As it becomes approved for medical indications, are kids going to be viewing it as less risky?" Dr Plunk said.

"This is not to say that there are not legitimate reasons for medical marijuana, and also decriminalization. But just because we allow medical marijuana, and if we do decriminalize it, that doesn't mean that there are not also negative consequences associated with marijuana use. Alcohol is legal, and we know there are tons of negative things that can happen to people who abuse alcohol. Cigarettes are legal to buy, and smoking is one of the worst things you can do for your health, so we need to have a dialogue with our kids about these dangers and pitfalls," he said.



Dr Andrew Plunk

Dr Plunk and his team looked at the potential impact of medical marijuana laws by examining the relationship between those laws and educational attainment.

They used datasets from the US Census and the American Community Survey for years 1990 through 2012. The datasets included 5,483,715 individuals of high-school age.

The researchers examined the level of education attained by individuals aged 14 to 18 years who were exposed to medical marijuana by virtue of living in states with medical marijuana laws, as well as those who were not exposed.

Specifically, they looked at the effects of medical marijuana laws on three educational attainment outcomes:

- Getting a high school diploma after completing 12th grade
- Beginning college but not necessarily completing a degree
- Obtaining any college degree after having begun college

They found that exposure to medical marijuana laws was associated with a 0.40 percentage point increase in the probability of failing to get a high school diploma or general educational development (GED) certificate completing the 12th grade (from 3.99% to 4.39%; odds ratio [OR] = 1.11; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.05 - 1.17).

Exposure to medical marijuana laws from ages 14 to 18 was also linked to a 1.84 percentage point increase in the probability of not enrolling in college (from 31.12% to 32.96%) and a 0.85 percentage point increase in the probability of not getting a college degree (from 45.30% to 46.15%).

"The impact of medical marijuana laws was not immediate, so if the policy change occurred when someone was 13 or 14, he or she did not immediately drop out of high school. Instead, there was a delayed impact; the law did not affect kids until they

were in the 12th grade," Dr. Plunk said.

"College enrollment and college completion with obtaining a degree were also affected by medical marijuana laws. These results are consistent with a longer-term developmental effect. As our study implies, legalizing medical marijuana could be associated with an additional 120,000 high school dropouts over a 17-year span," he said.

Medical marijuana cannot be prescribed to youth, Dr Plunk noted.

However, it is likely that young people are getting the medical marijuana that is legitimately prescribed for an adult through diversion, he said.

"There is research that suggests that 12th graders and older teens are using diverted medical marijuana meant for other people. So we really need to be cautious."

Equating "Legal" With "Safe"

Commenting on this study for *Medscape Medical News*, David C. Rettew, MD, director, Pediatric Psychiatry Clinic, University of Vermont College of Medicine, Burlington, said that as states consider legalizing cannabis, "one issue that often comes up is the tax revenue that can be generated from legal sales. Aside from the obvious human costs, this study indicates that a lot of that increased income could be offset by decreased tax revenues as people reduce their level of education."

This study adds to the growing scientific literature that demonstrates that cannabis, legal or not, is associated with a large number of negative outcomes, Dr Rettew added.

"As we tend to equate 'legal' with 'safe,' it is going to be more and more important that the public does not receive a whitewashed version of the true risks of cannabis use," he said.

The study was sponsored by the National Institutes of Health. Dr Plunk and Dr Rettew report no relevant financial relationships.

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