Youth Perspectives on Marijuana Use: Themes from Listening Sessions in King County, Washington

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COI Disclosure

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- We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.
Overview

- Context
- Youth listening sessions
- Themes from youth
- Opportunities for prevention
- Limitations & next steps
Context
Washington cannabis policies

1998

- Medical use approved for qualifying conditions

2011

- Retail sales and limited possession for adults 21+ legalized with 56% of the vote

2012

- Regulated medical, partially vetoed

July 2014

- Retail stores opened

July 2016

- Medical market integrated with retail
King County, Washington

- 2+ million residents
  - 600,000+ children & youth
- Growing population
- Urban and rural
Youth marijuana use in King County

- Average youth use rate: 15%
- 10th and 12th grade use is declining
- Fewer youth believe regular marijuana use is harmful
- Mirrors state and national trends
Youth marijuana use can have long term effects on the developing brain

- Negative impacts on memory, attention
- Poorer school performance
- Mental health problems: depression, anxiety, and psychosis
- Addiction: 1 in 6 people who begin using prior to age 18

Other risks include:

- Criminal justice system involvement
- Motor vehicle crash risk
King County Youth Marijuana Prevention & Education Program

- Partnership:
  - Public Health – Seattle & King County
  - King County Department of Community & Health Services

- Funding: Washington Department of Health dedicated marijuana account

- Goal: Reduce underage marijuana initiation and use
5 year strategic plan

- Spring 2018
- Input from community partners
- Healthy Youth Survey data
- Information from youth listening sessions
Youth listening sessions
Purpose

- Learn about youth knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs around marijuana use
- Gain insights on what information youth want and how to deliver it

*Participating youth agreed not to disclose their personal use or the personal details of other youth who may use marijuana.*
Implementation

- Focused on key demographics or priority populations
- KC-YMPEP: funding, training, & technical assistance
- Partners: session recruitment, facilitation, & transcription
- Coding and analysis conducted through NVIVO
- 2 additional sessions with young adults; similar findings

18 partners
26 listening sessions
Participant snapshot

202 youth participants
8 average # youth/group

15.2 youth participants
9.6 average # youth/group
Demographics

Geography

North King County 5%
Seattle 29%
South King County 48%
East King County 15%
No Response 3%
Demographics

Race/Ethnicity

- Multiple races: 29%
- Black: 27%
- Latino/a or Hispanic: 16%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 14%
- Asian/Asian American: 9%
- White or Caucasian: 2%
- American Indian/Alaska Native: 0%
- Other/No Answer: 2%

Free/Reduced Lunch

- Yes: 51%
- Not Sure: 10%
- No: 37%
- No answer: 2%
Gender

- Female: 48%
- Male: 45%
- Trans: 1%
- Non-binary: 1%
- Other: 1%

Sexual Orientation

- Straight/Heterosexual: 84%
- Bisexual: 4%
- Gay/Lesbian: 3%
- Questioning: 1%
- Other: 4%
- No Response: 4%
Themes from youth
Disclaimer

These sessions were meant to be an initial exploration of youth perspectives with the goal of informing further inquiry. They were not meant to be evidence-based or produce scientifically-sound findings. Instead, they serve as a starting point for future KC-YMPEP activities around understanding youth perspectives.
Youth use marijuana to follow social norms & to self-medicate.

Other reasons: easy access, lack of protective factors, rebellion
Reasons youth may use, continued

Social norms:
- Peer pressure, curiosity, everyone else is doing it
- Social media & pop culture

Self-medication:
- Escape
- Forget
- Relieve pain
- Deal with anger

“Youth] smoke marijuana for 2 reasons: either ‘cause others are doing it so they want to be cool and fit in. Or to relieve pain. There’s people going through struggles.”
They don’t have nothing else to do… they don’t have somebody in real life, somebody to be there for them to actually do things [with]. That can be their gateway. So, you need things in that community, where a kid could feel like he’s wanted or something like that.”
Reasons youth may avoid use

Personal values & protective factors may help prevent marijuana use.

- Concern about negative personal consequences
- Personal, family, or religious values
- Protective factors: engaged parents, non-using friends, involvement in activities
- Knowledge of risks
- Desire to avoid potential discipline, addiction
Most youth do not think marijuana use is a problem and have little concern for its risks.

- More influenced by marijuana’s perceived popularity
- Retail legalization is normalizing marijuana use
- Marijuana has some medical benefits and is not as bad as other substances

"It’s becoming something almost habitual. Something you’re used to seeing. Therefore, it seems normalized… seems okay. Then you think, ‘well I can just do it too, and it’ll be all right.’"
Estimates of use

Youth believe that many of their peers use marijuana.

- Peer use rates estimated between 80 & 100% -- far above the HYS King County average of 15%
- Social media makes use seem common
- Rates of use are different for social versus regular users
Youth think that marijuana is easy to get.

- Obtainable through personal connections: peers, siblings, or a person they know who sells
- Social media plays a role in marijuana sales
- Sometimes accessed through parents
I think it’s just so popular nowadays, especially with our age group. So, even if you’re not close with anybody, you can just ask around and one out of three people are gonna have it.”
Opportunities for prevention
Youth mostly rely on media, peers, school, & parents for information on marijuana.

- Common sources: internet searches, social media, articles, advertisements, music

- Concerns of distrust and bias in all messages, especially those from:
  - Marijuana industry
  - Health educators
  - People who have never used marijuana
Youth want more unbiased information about marijuana.

- How marijuana works
- Effects: long-term and short-term
- Research & evidence about marijuana risks & benefits
Does it really help with stress?  
How long does it stay in my body?  
What are the before and after effects?  
What does it do to my body and brain?  
How does it make you feel?  
Why is it so addictive?  
Is cancer a side effect?  
What will it do to my lungs?
Youth want risk messages about marijuana shared in non-lecture formats.

- Give unbiased information so that youth can decide
- Engage youth in open discussions
- Locate messages where youth will see them
- Do not impose shame or rely on fear tactics
Adults have kind of exaggerated effects of marijuana to the point where teens want to exaggerate it in the other direction and say it’s harmless... which isn’t entirely true either. There aren’t a lot of people who are very realistic about what it can and can’t do.”
Limitations & next steps
Limitations

- Themes are not generalizable
- Results were analyzed as a whole, not by specific demographics groups
- Varying facilitation styles
- Social desirability bias among youth participants
The listening sessions were one step towards understanding and taking action on youth perceptions of marijuana use.

- Info sheets
- Education inventory
- Parent communications
Next Steps: other projects

- MMWR article (in press)
- Quantitative survey with youth
- Evaluation projects (school discipline policies)
- Youth summit

Learn more & follow KC-YMPEP’s work at www.kingcounty.gov/health/marijuana
Questions?
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