

Suspension Boosts Marijuana Use In Teens

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New research has found that suspending teens from school for using marijuana is likely to lead to more marijuana use among their classmates.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Washington and in Australia, found that counseling was a more effective means of combating marijuana use.

The researchers also found that, while enforcing anti-drug policies is a key factor in whether teens use marijuana, the way schools respond to those who violate those policies matters greatly.

The new study compared drug policies at schools in Washington State and Victoria, Australia, to determine how they affected marijuana use by students.

The researchers said the results startled them. They found that students attending schools with suspension policies for illicit drug use were 1.6 times more likely than their peers at schools without such policies to use marijuana in the next year.

Moreover, that was the case with the student body as a whole, not just those who were suspended, according to the study's findings.

“That was surprising to us,” said co-author Dr. Richard Catalano, a professor of social work and co-founder of the Social Development Research Group at the University of

Washington's School of Social Work. "It means that suspensions are certainly not having a deterrent effect. It's just the opposite."

By contrast, the study found that students attending schools with policies of referring students who use marijuana to a school counselor were almost 50 percent less likely to use marijuana.

Other ways of responding to policy violators, such as sending them to educational programs, expelling them, or calling the police, were found to have no significant impact on marijuana use, according to the study's findings.

Data used in the new research came from the International Youth Development Study, an initiative started in 2002 to examine behaviors among young people in Washington and Victoria.

The two states were chosen since they are similar in size and demographics, but differ considerably in their approaches to drug use among students, researchers said. Washington schools are more likely to suspend students, call police or require offenders to attend education or cessation programs, the researchers note, while Victoria schools emphasize an approach that favors counseling.

Researchers surveyed more than 3,200 seventh- and ninth-graders and nearly 200 school administrators in both 2002 and 2003. Students were asked about their use of marijuana, alcohol, and cigarettes, and also about their schools' drug policies and enforcement.

In both survey years, marijuana use was higher among Washington students than those in Victoria, the researchers said. Almost 12 percent of Washington ninth-graders had used marijuana in the past month, compared with just over nine percent of Victoria ninth-graders, according to the study's findings.

The researchers were initially interested in teens' use of alcohol and cigarettes, according to Catalano. But after Washington legalized recreational marijuana use for adults in 2012, the researchers decided to take a closer look at the data to determine how legalization might influence students in Washington versus their counterparts in Australia, where pot remains illegal.

Research has shown a consistent link between increased access to marijuana and higher rates of self-reported use by adolescents, the study notes. In Washington and Colorado, where recreational marijuana use by adults was also legalized in 2012, school systems have new responsibilities to educate students about marijuana and respond effectively when teens are caught using it, Catalano said.

“To reduce marijuana use among all students, we need to ensure that schools are using drug policies that respond to policy violations by educating or counseling students, not just penalizing them,” he said.

The study was published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Source: [University of Washington](#)