



## Original article

## Marijuana Legalization and Parents' Attitudes, Use, and Parenting in Washington State



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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** The recent legalization of nonmedical marijuana use in several U.S. states has unknown implications for those who are actively parenting. This study examined parents' reactions to marijuana legalization and changes in attitudes and behaviors over time.

**Methods:** Data were from a gender-balanced, ethnically diverse sample of 395 parents in Washington State who were participating in the longitudinal Seattle Social Development Project. Participants were interviewed 15 times between 1985 (age 10) and 2014 (age 39). Adult nonmedical marijuana use was legalized in Washington in 2012 and retail outlets opened in 2014.

**Results:** Results showed (1) one third of parents incorrectly believed the legal age of nonmedical marijuana use to be 18; (2) significant increase in approval of adult marijuana use and decrease in perceived harm of regular use; (3) wide opposition to teen use and use around one's children; and (4) substantial increases in frequency of use and marijuana use disorder among parents who used.

**Conclusions:** Despite increased acceptance and frequency of adult use, parents remain widely opposed to teen use but need facts and strategies for talking with their children about marijuana.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

From a prevention perspective, results revealed a possible silver lining in that—despite increased acceptance and frequency of adult marijuana use—parents remained widely opposed to teen use. Prevention efforts for this era of marijuana legalization should better equip parents in how to best talk with their children about marijuana.

Recent years have seen unprecedented policy change around the legal standing of nonmedical marijuana. One of the first major shifts occurred in Washington State when, in December 2012, the possession and use of nonmedical marijuana was made legal for adults over age 21. Possible social and behavioral changes associated with this policy shift are important to understand but not easy to predict. Changes among parents are particularly important to document given their role in providing family guidelines and as models for their children's behavior. But how well do Washington parents understand the new law? To

what extent have parents' attitudes changed toward approval of marijuana use and its perceived harm? Has parents' use of marijuana changed? And what are parents communicating to their children about marijuana given the change in law? Timely examination of available data addressing these questions is essential to inform the conversation about marijuana nationally as more states consider legal changes similar to those in Washington.

A study by Mason et al. [1] examining parent and adolescent reactions to marijuana legalization provided a first look at some of these questions using one wave of data from 115 low-income families from Tacoma, Washington, surveyed in the summer of 2013. In the present study, we extend and complement the findings by Mason et al. in a longitudinal sample of parents living in Washington State drawn from the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP). In addition to examining reactions to the changing legal status of nonmedical marijuana, this study

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assessed beliefs around teen use, marijuana-related parenting practices, and changes in attitudes and behaviors over time.

#### *Parents' understanding of the new law*

Given the newness of a legal marijuana market, from production to adult use in Washington State, there is much potential for misunderstanding. Although nonmedical use of marijuana by adults is now legal, many restrictions remain. For example, homegrown marijuana, consumption of marijuana in view of the general public, and possession or use by anyone under age 21 remain illegal [2]. Mason et al. [1] found substantial uncertainty about these aspects of the new law (e.g., only 57% selected the correct legal age limit). We will examine how well these legal parameters for personal use are understood by SSDP parents who were interviewed approximately 6–18 months after the sample by Mason et al.

#### *Parents' approval and perceived harm of adult and adolescent use*

Marijuana norms likely to be associated with changes in legal status include approval of adult use, beliefs about the potential harmfulness of use, attitudes toward parental use around children, and approval of teen use. Some research indicates that those living in states with legalized use of medical marijuana have norms more supportive of use than those in states without such laws [3–5]. Mason et al. [1] showed that parents perceived that legalization had little impact on their marijuana-related attitudes and behavior, but prospective change was not assessed. SSDP assessed approval of marijuana use and beliefs about harm from childhood to age 39, including a survey wave in 2014 subsequent to legalization. These assessments enable examination of possible longitudinal changes associated with the new law.

Studies show a strong link between social norms and substance use in general [6,7]. However, there is little research from which to make confident predictions about the influence of changing norms and marijuana legalization on those who are actively parenting. Notably, parental substance use is strongly associated with use among their children [8–10], so to the extent marijuana legalization increases use among parents then their children would be at increased risk for use. One study [11], based in part on SSDP data, confirmed that parents' marijuana-specific norms and use were associated with child substance use. Direct child exposure is a major mechanism by which risk is exacerbated [12]. Thus, it is especially important to consider the role of legalization in how parents approach their own marijuana-using behavior in the presence of their children. Is legalization associated with greater likelihood that parents would expose their children to their own marijuana use (similar to other legal substances such as alcohol)? The present study will examine the approval and perceived harmfulness of exposing children to parental marijuana use, as well as parents' attitudes toward teen use.

#### *Parents' marijuana use*

Some have argued that marijuana legalization will increase use [13–15], yet there are data to suggest that changes may be small [4,16–19]. Studies from Australia and the Netherlands suggest little link between the legal status of marijuana and the

prevalence of use, though there was some increase in frequency of use among heavy users as well as an association between ease of access to legal marijuana outlets and increased use [15,18,19]. Some U.S. studies show a higher prevalence of use in states with legalized medical use [4,16–20], though it is possible that higher rates of use contributed to medical legalization rather than the reverse [4,5]. Other studies report no evidence of effects of medical marijuana laws on use or effects contingent on other factors [21–23]. Most parents in the Mason et al. [1] study reported that neither they nor their children would be more likely to use marijuana as a result of legalization. These studies underscore the difficulty in predicting how the legalization of nonmedical marijuana might be associated with changes in use. Using longitudinal data from SSDP, we will examine developmental changes in marijuana use among parents in Washington State through the time of legalization when they were in their late 30s.

#### *Parents' marijuana-related communication and behavior with their children*

A number of studies link parenting practices, including the communication of clear rules and guidelines, to youth substance use [9,24,25]. Parents involving their children in their own substance use (e.g., getting a beer or cigarettes for them) is also associated with youth substance use [26,27]. Most parents (70%) in the Mason et al. [1] study reported having discussions about the marijuana law with their children, many of which focused on marijuana-related household rules. We are aware of no other studies of the impact of changes in marijuana laws on parenting practices. Yet, marijuana-specific parenting practices may change for a number of reasons. For example, some parents may feel less need to communicate clear rules about marijuana use because it is a legal adult drug. Other parents may feel greater urgency to set rules with their children if they suspect that adults in other households where their children visit may use marijuana openly. We will examine marijuana-specific parenting practices following legalization in the present study.

## **Methods**

### *Sample*

The SSDP is a longitudinal study examining a broad range of developmental factors and substance use and health outcomes. The study population in 1985 included all fifth-grade students in 18 Seattle elementary schools that overrepresented high-crime neighborhoods ( $N = 1,053$ ). From this population, 808 students (77%) consented to participate in the longitudinal study and constituted the SSDP sample. Fifteen waves of data have been collected from age 10, in 1985, to age 39, in 2014. Surveys were administered annually through age 16, then every 2–4 years thereafter. Retention averaged 90% of the still-living sample across waves. Retention at age 39 was 88%; 37 participants were deceased. The study obtained active consent and was approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee at the University of Washington.

Analyses reported here focused on 395 participants who lived in Washington State at the time of the 2014 survey and were parents who had face-to-face contact with their child (age 19 or younger) at least once a month. These parents were 56% female, 45% European American, 27% African-American, 22% Asian

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