

# WA survey shows shifting cannabis trends: higher use, higher perceived risks

11 years after legalization, cannabis use among WA young adults rises, but perceived risks also increase

**Olympia, Wash** Eleven years after cannabis was legalized for non-medical use in Washington, data from the Young Adult Health Survey shows increased use among 18- to 25-year-olds yet also shows encouraging signs that perceptions of risk are shifting.

The survey revealed that although more than half of young adults (53.6%) reported no cannabis use in the past year, nearly 8% of 18- to 25-year-olds report daily use. Fourteen percent of 18- to 20-year-olds obtained cannabis from a parent or a caregiver.

“We’re always talking about balancing hope and concern,” said Jason Kilmer, a University of Washington School of Medicine professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, who has been conducting the survey since 2014.

“While it is concerning that more frequent use has been increasing, it is hopeful that most young adults aren’t using this substance. Even 11 years into legalization, the majority of 18- to 25-year-olds aren’t using cannabis.”

“The biggest trend that we’re seeing after 11 years of data collection is that use among the 18- to 25-year-old age group has increased yearly, monthly, weekly, and daily.” Kilmer said. “And it’s largely due to the 21- to 25-year-olds who have legal access.”

## Changing perceptions of risk

For the first time, survey respondents reported an increase in perceived physical, emotional, and cognitive risk from regular cannabis use. Research from the University of Michigan’s *Monitoring the Future* study has shown that when perceived risk rises, actual use tends to decline the following year.

“HCA continues to use proven prevention methods to help young people choose behaviors that support their overall health,” said Ryan Moran, DrPH, MHSA, director of the Washington State Health Care Authority (HCA). “The fact that most young people are not using shows prevention techniques work, and underscores the importance of continued investments in these efforts.”

## Access, parents, and prevention

Kilmer emphasized the importance of engagement: Parents, caregivers, and guardians are partners in prevention,” said Kilmer. “Washington has great [resources to help families talk with young adults](#) about the risks of cannabis use, including the Washington state [free, anonymous resource](#) for residents 18 to 29 wishing to assess their alcohol and cannabis use and learn coping strategies.”

## **Cannabis and driving**

Nearly one-third of survey respondents who reported cannabis use in the past month also reported driving within three hours of using. Driving within three hours of using would likely result in being above the Washington State DUI threshold of 5 nanograms of THC per milliliter of blood. Research suggests waiting six to eight hours before driving after inhaling and eight to 12 hours after oral ingestion.

“Though the figure has trended down over the years,” Kilmer said, “it’s still far too high in the context of recent findings about fatalities on Washington roads. People get, ‘Don’t drink and drive,’ but we hear way too many people say, ‘Well, I drive better when I’m high,’ and they really don’t.”

According to the Washington Traffic Safety Commission, there was a 156% increase in fatal crashes involving drivers ages 18-24 from 2015 to 2024 who were impaired by cannabis (THC blood level greater than 5 ng/mL). Cannabis has been shown to reduce reaction time, ability to pay attention to multiple things occurring at once and increase lane departures.

## **About the survey**

The Young Adult Health Survey is administered by a collaborative effort including the UW Medicine Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and is supported by a contract with HCA’s Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery. Now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year, the survey collects data from Washington residents ages 18-25.

END