Logo, company name

Description automatically generated **Consortium to Advance Prevention Solutions to the**

**Opioid Crisis (CAPSOC)**

**Protections for Youth are Needed to Meet the Challenges Presented by Increasing Trends to Legalize Marijuana**

**SYNOPSIS 2-12-23**

**Research shows that marijuana poses significant risks to the health and safety of youth.**

* *Marijuana use has negative health effects for youth*
  + Early marijuana use increases the likelihood of other substance use and a range of cognitive and mental health problems.[[1]](#endnote-1)
  + Marijuana use can interfere with brain development, especially brain regions responsible for decision making, reward seeking, and impulse control.[[2]](#endnote-2) The risks of marijuana use persist well into early adulthood when the brain is still undergoing development.[[3]](#endnote-3)
  + Young people are at even great risk of negative health effects due to the increasing strength/potency of THC (the psychoactive and addictive ingredient) in marijuana.[[4]](#endnote-4) The average percentage THC in marijuana samples seized by the Drug Enforcement Administration increased from approximately 4% to 15% from 1995 to 2021.[[5]](#endnote-5) Some common marijuana products favored by young people (i.e., concentrated marijuana in vaping products and edibles) have upwards of 90% THC.[[6]](#endnote-6) Use of high potency marijuana is associated with increased risk of addiction, psychosis, depression, anxiety, sleep problems, memory loss, and other physical and cognitive impairments.[[7]](#endnote-7)
  + The largest increase in youth exposures reported to poison control centers in recent years was due to intentional ingestion of edibles among adolescents.[[8]](#endnote-8)
* *Marijuana use increases the risk for addiction, especially among youth*
  + Individuals in late adolescence and early adulthood are at highest risk for marijuana use disorder.[[9]](#endnote-9) Adolescents who use marijuana are at least twice as likely as adults who do so to develop marijuana use disorder.[[10]](#endnote-10)
  + Marijuana use is the main substance for which youth present for addiction treatment.[[11]](#endnote-11)
* *Marijuana poses other health and safety risks to youth of all ages*
  + Unintentional ingestion by young children can have serious medical outcomes, including central nervous system depression and hospitalization.[[12]](#endnote-12)
  + Marijuana affects judgement and motor skills. Driving under the influence can increase the risk for car crashes, especially for young and inexperienced drivers.[[13]](#endnote-13)

**Marijuana use among youth is common, placing many at risk.**

* *Marijuana is one of the most commonly used substances among adolescents, and the prevalence of young adult marijuana use is increasing.*
  + In 2022, over 8% of 8th-graders, nearly 20% of 10th-graders, and over 30% of 12th-graders reported using marijuana in the past year.[[14]](#endnote-14) While the number has not significantly changed in recent years, we should not be satisfied this high prevalence.
  + Marijuana use among young adults ages 19-30 increased significantly in 2021, reaching historic highs.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**Legalization and commercialization of marijuana pose unique risks to youth.**

* *Legalization normalizes marijuana use and lessens perceptions of harm and risk.*
  + Marijuana legalization normalizes use, reduces perceptions of harm, eases access, and is associated with higher rates of risky use, especially among young people.[[16]](#endnote-16)
  + When young people believe using marijuana is low-risk, rates of use increase.[[17]](#endnote-17)
  + In states that have legalized recreational marijuana, rates of initiation of marijuana use among adolescents are higher than the national average in this age group.[[18]](#endnote-18)
  + Research into effects of legalization on youth use is limited and has some methodological weaknesses, but findings generally indicate that legalization is associated with increased rates of adolescent marijuana use,[[19]](#endnote-19) increased rates or intensity of young adult marijuana and other substance use,[[20]](#endnote-20) and increases in adverse consequences,[[21]](#endnote-21) such as pediatric unintentional exposures leading to hospitalization[[22]](#endnote-22) and marijuana use disorder in youth.[[23]](#endnote-23)
* *When marijuana is commercialized, as it is in the U.S., industry targets youth* 
  + In the U.S., legalization takes the form of commercialization,[[24]](#endnote-24) which allows profit-driven industry players to produce, package, advertise, and sell marijuana to consumers.The marijuana industry is motivated by profit, not public health.
  + We have repeatedly seen how industries selling addictive substances that are legal for adult use (i.e., alcohol, cigarettes, vaping products) have targeted youth through product design, marketing, and locations of sale.[[25]](#endnote-25)
  + The marijuana industry, which often includes many of the same players as the tobacco and alcohol industries, is already using similar tactics, including the packaging, advertising, and sale of products targeted to young people.[[26]](#endnote-26)

**Government must play a critical role in protecting youth in the context of marijuana legalization.**

* There are concrete steps policymakers can take to lower the likelihood that marijuana commercialization exacerbates rising rates of marijuana use among adolescents and young adults – and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past that made underage drinking a generally accepted norm and youth nicotine vaping a crisis to be contained.
* State governments changing their marijuana laws should base their decisions and policies on science, not public pressure or business interests; carefully consider how regulations have succeeded and failed to protect youth from alcohol and nicotine as well as recent experiences of other states that have implemented changes; and prioritize the protection of children, adolescents, and young adults in their drug reform laws.
* Laws and regulations allowing use and sale of marijuana should include restrictions on types of products that can be manufactured, how they are packaged and marketed, and where and how they are sold to limit products, access, and exposure that can be harmful to youth.
* Policymakers should implement a science-based public education campaign in concert with marijuana reforms that provides accurate information regarding potential benefits and risks of using marijuana, particularly for youth. It should correct misinformation spread by the marijuana industry that minimizes perceptions of risk among youth and that conflates arguments regarding decriminalization, medical use, and widespread commercialization and associated social justice and health implications.

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