Marijuana Use Among Older Americans is Up, Concern About Use is Down

Boston University study findings published in "Drug and Alcohol Dependence"

Boston, MA (PRWEB) December 15, 2016 -- A new study by Boston University School of Social Work professor Christopher Salas-Wright finds that marijuana use among older Americans has increased markedly in recent years. Drawing from national data, Salas-Wright and his colleagues found that the prevalence of marijuana use among adults ages 50 to 64 increased from a low of 3% in 2002 to more than 9% in 2014. The study, published in Drug and Alcohol Dependence, also found that marijuana use increased significantly among adults ages 65 and older.

"We see clear and compelling evidence that a substantially greater proportion of middle-aged and older adults in the United States are using marijuana," Salas-Wright said. "This finding is consistent with a growing number of studies looking at trends in marijuana use among older Americans."

The study used nationally representative data from the National Survey on Drug use and Health collected annually between 2002 and 2014. Analyses are based on self-report questions about past 12-month marijuana use posed to 46,600 middle-aged (ages 50-64) and 29,418 older adults (ages 65 and older).

Study findings also reveal changes in how older Americans perceive marijuana. For instance, the proportion of middle-aged Americans reporting they strongly disapprove of marijuana use dropped by roughly half, from 62% 2002 to 31.5% in 2014. Salas-Wright also observed large decreases in the number of older Americans reporting a view of marijuana use as a "great risk" to one's health.

"In addition to changes in marijuana use, we also are seeing really noteworthy changes in how older Americans are thinking about marijuana," Salas-Wright noted. "And our study findings suggest that changes in how older Americans view marijuana explain, in part, the increases that we are seeing around their marijuana use."

The study was co-authored by Michael G. Vaughn and Katherine Holzer of Saint Louis University, Lenise Cummings-Vaughn of Washington University, Erik Nelson of Indiana University, Sehun Oh of The University of Texas at Austin, and, Boston University graduate student, Millan AbiNader.

Consistent with prior research, the authors also found that marijuana users are, in general, more likely to take part in other risky behaviors and get arrested. Interestingly, however, study findings indicate that the increase in marijuana use among middle-aged Americans was driven not by those involved in other risky or deviant behaviors, but primarily by those reporting no use of other illicit drugs and no criminal justice system involvement. The authors also observed that, perhaps due to changes in marijuana laws across the country, older marijuana users are now less likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than was the case in the early 2000's.

"It is hard to say for certain, but it seems that, as marijuana use has become more normative and tolerated, it has, to some degree, become less of a deviant behavior," Vaughn said. "This may be why we're not seeing the same associations with risky behavior and criminal justice system contact among older Americans who use marijuana as we used to."
Click here to read the report, "Trends and Correlates of Marijuana Use Among Late Middle-Aged and Older Adults in the United States, 2002–2014," in full.
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