The 2023 Delaware Epidemiological Profile

Substance Use, Mental Health, and Related Issues:

Marijuana
The Delaware 2023 Epidemiological Profile: Substance Use, Mental Health, and Related Issues

is prepared for

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&
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The annual Delaware State Epidemiological Profile is a valuable data resource for strategic planning, decision-making, and evaluation. The report includes modules that highlight indicators of mental health and wellbeing, patterns of substance use and its consequences, and risk and protective factors for people in Delaware. The report also highlights crosscutting issues that warrant attention as well as populations that may experience disproportionate risk for these concerns.

This module is part of a series of materials. To review the Annual Epidemiological Profile Companion Guide (which includes data notes), modules on additional topics, downloadable slides, and infographics, please visit the UD Center for Drug and Health Studies Delaware Epidemiological Reports page. Links to presentations referenced in the annual profile are available from the Presentations webpage.

The SEOW is facilitated by a team at the Center for Drug and Health Studies at the University of Delaware that convenes a network of more than 100 representatives from approximately 55 state and nonprofit agencies, community organizations, advocacy groups, and other entities. The SEOW’s mission is to bring data on behavioral health and associated issues to the forefront of prevention and treatment efforts in Delaware. To learn more, please visit the What is the SEOW? webpage.
Marijuana

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Marijuana

Over the past two decades, many states have enacted laws that change the status of marijuana. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 38 states (including Delaware), the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands allow for medical use of cannabis products. In April 2023, Delaware joined several dozen states and U.S. territories, including neighboring Maryland and New Jersey, in legalizing the recreational use of marijuana by adults. As the laws have changed around the use of marijuana, the public perception of its risks has decreased. At the same time, the amount of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main psychoactive component of marijuana, has increased considerably (ElSohly et al., 2016; NASEM, 2017).

Research suggests that marijuana use at an early age poses risks to brain development, cognitive functioning, and more frequent and heavier use in later life (Weir, 2015; Lisdahl et al., 2013; Gruber et al., 2017). But as the following data suggests, marijuana remains a popular substance among youth as well as adults.

This module presents an overview of marijuana use in Delaware based on the following data sources:

- National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)
- Delaware School Survey (DSS)
- Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)
The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) annually provides a report with U.S. estimates and state comparisons for major substance use and mental health indicators. In 2021, NSDUH estimates that almost one in six Delawareans aged 12 and over used marijuana in the past month and nearly one in five used it in the past year. The highest rates were reported among the 18 to 25 year age group. This group was also least likely to perceive great risk of regular marijuana use (9.96%).

Due to changes in the survey methodology made during the COVID-19 pandemic, NSDUH guidance advises against comparing data collected in 2020 or later with data collected in 2019 or earlier. As a result, the NSDUH estimates presented here are based on only one year of data (2021) rather than the typical combined two-year estimates and therefore are considered preliminary. With the following data, SAMHSA cautions: “Because 2021 state estimates are based on a single year of data, there is greater variance around the estimates than for the usual two-year estimates, particularly in small states and for uncommon outcomes.” Users of this data can visit the NSDUH State Data Tables for more documentation on methodology.

<table>
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<th>Measure</th>
<th>Total 12 or Older</th>
<th>AGE GROUP</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>12-17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past year marijuana use</td>
<td>19.16</td>
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<td>Past month marijuana use</td>
<td>14.98</td>
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<td>Perceived great risk of smoking</td>
<td>19.35</td>
<td>21.26</td>
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<td>marijuana once a month</td>
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Figure 1: Marijuana use and perceptions of great risk in Delaware by age group, NSDUH 2021

1 Source: “2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Model-Based Prevalence Estimates (50 States and the District of Columbia),” Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
2 Estimates are based on a survey-weighted hierarchical Bayes estimation approach and generated by Markov Chain Monte Carlo techniques.
The Delaware School Surveys (DSS) are state-funded annual surveys administered to 5th, 8th, and 11th grade students in traditional public schools in Delaware. There are two versions of the survey, one for 5th grade students and a secondary version for 8th and 11th graders. The DSS are designed to provide estimates of youth substance use, including marijuana, and related factors. DSS data are used for National Outcomes Measures as well as state and local program planning and evaluation. (For more information or to review the survey questionnaires and earlier reports, visit the DSS page of the University of Delaware Center for Drug and Health Studies website. Due to the data gap in 2020 as well as the changes in the methodology for the 2021-2022 administration, results of the 2022 DSS should be compared with caution to previous DSS survey results.)

The charts in this section highlight select data from the 2022 DSS.

![Marijuana Use by Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)](chart)

In 2022, 14% of 11th grade students reported past month marijuana use. This is similar to the rate of past month alcohol use (16%) reported on the same survey. One in ten 8th graders reported using marijuana at some point in their lifetime and one in 20 reported using marijuana in the past month.

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4 For more information on pandemic related impacts on data collection, please view the Companion Guide of this epidemiological report.
In 2022, girls were slightly more likely to report marijuana use among both 8th and 11th graders compared to boys and nonbinary students.

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5 In the 2022 DSS Secondary survey, students were asked to identify their gender as boy, girl, nonbinary, or to self-describe their gender. Data reported from the DSS by gender here reflects these three primary categories (boy, girl, and nonbinary/self-describe) and students’ responses are reported by their self-identified gender. As a result, the categories of “boy” and “girl” may include both cisgender and transgender students. For more detailed information about nonbinary and transgender students in the DSS, please visit the chapter on Gender and Sexuality.
Students’ perception of risk appears to decrease over time, with less than one in four 11th graders reporting that they perceive there is great risk in smoking marijuana regularly.
Students reported consuming marijuana using a number of methods, with smoking and vaping being the slightly more common.
The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a CDC-funded survey that is administered in odd-numbered years to both national and state samples of students. The survey monitors various topics of health risk behaviors, including substance use. Delaware has participated in these surveys for over 20 years. Here we report findings from the 2021 Delaware YRBS among middle and high school students.

According to the 2021 YRBS, 1 in 25 Delaware high school students report that they tried marijuana for the first time before becoming a teen.

Approximately one in six high school students reported past month marijuana use in 2021. The rate was highest among seniors (24%).

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7 Until the 2023 YRBS data is analyzed, comparisons of the 2021 data to previous data should be avoided, as findings from the 2021 data may be an exception to ongoing trends. For a more detailed description of pandemic impacts on data collection as it pertains to the YRBS, please refer to the [Companion Guide](https://nccd.cdc.gov/Youthonline/App/Default.aspx) accompanying this report.
Currently used marijuana is defined in the YRBS as using marijuana on at least 1 day during the 30 days before the survey.

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8 Currently used marijuana is defined in the YRBS as using marijuana on at least 1 day during the 30 days before the survey.
One in 20 middle school students, including 9% of 8th graders, reported that they had used marijuana at least once in their lifetime.

**Marijuana Policy Updates**

In April 2023, recreational marijuana became legal in Delaware after House Bill 1 became law without the Governor’s signature. The Act “…removes all penalties for use or possession of a personal use quantity of marijuana and marijuana accessories. It further specifies that the adult sharing of a personal use quantity or less of marijuana is legal activity for those 21 years of age or older and that those 21 or older may possess, use, display, purchase, or transport accessories and personal use quantities of marijuana without penalty….“ Personal use quantities are up to one ounce of leaf marijuana or the “equivalent amounts of marijuana products in other forms.”

House Bill 2, also enacted without the Governor’s signature, provides for the establishment of a “legal, regulated marijuana industry” in Delaware.
References and Data Sources


Delaware General Assembly. (n.d.) House Bills 1 and 2. Retrieved from https://legis.delaware.gov/AllLegislation


Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2023). “2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Model-Based Prevalence Estimates (50 States and the District of Columbia).”