



# Prevention Network of Washington County

## Position Statement on Recreational Marijuana Legalization

**Executive Summary:** Across the United States (U.S.), the legalization of recreational marijuana has been on the rise (10 states have legalized recreational marijuana use as of December 2018).<sup>1</sup> When considering legalizing marijuana, it is important to evaluate the costs to society, the rate of drugged driving, public safety issues, and job accidents and injuries. It is especially important to consider the impact that the legalization of marijuana has on our youth, including decreased perception of harm, increased access to marijuana, and increased rates of youth use. Based on the negative implications of the legalization of marijuana for our youth and society, the Prevention Network of Washington County opposes its legalization in the state of Wisconsin.

**Fact: Substance abuse in the U.S. accounts for more than \$600 billion in health, crime, and loss of productivity costs annually.<sup>2</sup> By substance, alcohol accounts for \$235 billion, tobacco accounts for \$193 billion, and illicit drugs account for \$181 billion.<sup>2</sup>**



Legalization initiatives and the legalization of marijuana can be tied to an increase in the use of marijuana and resulting dependence and addiction.<sup>3</sup> An increase in use and misuse of marijuana has been linked to increased crime, health costs, and lost productivity in the workplace.<sup>3</sup> The taxes imposed on alcohol and tobacco products only recoup a small percentage of the societal costs related to these substances, and as such it is unrealistic to expect marijuana taxation to cover the societal costs associated with legalization of marijuana.<sup>3,4</sup>

The state of Colorado legalized recreational marijuana use in 2012, and as of 2017, its costs far exceed tax revenues.<sup>7</sup> In 2017 alone, Colorado's marijuana costs related to health,

productivity, crime, traffic, housing and tourism exceeded \$1.13 billion.<sup>5</sup> Coloradans spent \$4.50 on mitigating the effects of legalization for each dollar of tax revenue taken in by the state.<sup>7</sup>

**Fact: The use of marijuana leads to an increased risk of workplace injuries and accidents.<sup>6</sup>**

If marijuana is used in the workplace, it can affect the health and safety of the person taking it as well as those around them, as well as have an adverse effect on productivity.<sup>7</sup>

In a study of workers, marijuana was found to have the following effects:<sup>8</sup>

- Impaired concentration
- Short-term memory problems
- Loss of balance and coordination
- Lower alertness and decreased reaction time
- Impaired mood
- Changes in sensory perception
- Impaired ability to perform complex tasks

**Fact: Legalizing marijuana would significantly increase accessibility to youth.<sup>5</sup>**

The legalization of marijuana was found in a RAND corporation study to decrease the pre-tax price of marijuana by more than 80%.<sup>9</sup> The same study also found that such reductions in price would be accompanied by up to a 50% increase in consumption of marijuana.<sup>11</sup> Given previous evidence that youth's consumption of marijuana is highly sensitive to price changes, it is likely that such a drastic decrease in the price of marijuana would lead to an increase in youth access and consumption.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting increase in use by both adults and youth would have widespread ramifications in areas such as adolescent brain development, academic achievement, employability, highway and public safety, as well as the economy.

**Fact: States that have legalized marijuana have higher percentages of youth marijuana use than states without such laws.<sup>6</sup>**

Eight of the top ten states in 2017 for past 30 day marijuana use among 12-17 year olds have legalized recreational marijuana, and all ten have legalized some form of medical marijuana.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, all states that have legalized recreational marijuana fall into the top 20 states for percentage of past 30-day use of marijuana among youth age 12-17.<sup>11</sup>

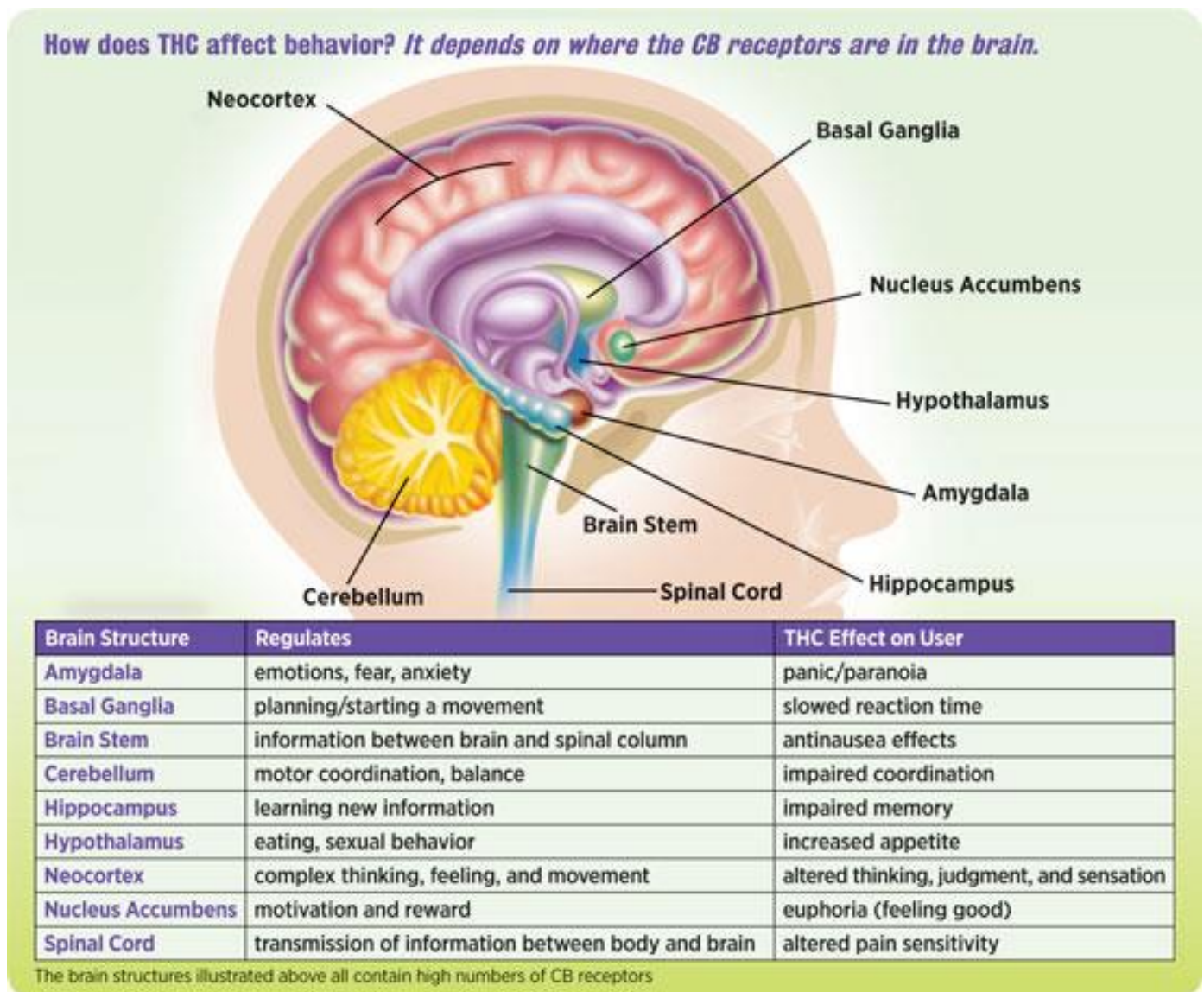
**Fact: Marijuana has both short and long-term effects on brain development and academic achievement. Use of marijuana, especially in youth, increases the potential for developing mood disorders and marijuana dependence.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>**

Initiation of marijuana use during adolescence has been associated with cognitive challenges including:<sup>12</sup>

- Lower IQ
- Poorer attention and verbal memory
- Poorer memory retrieval and executive function
- Reduced processing speed
- Emotional regulation problems

These deficits are thought to be caused by the disruption of the brain's grey and white matter by marijuana, which results in

**Figure 1.** How does THC affect the brain?<sup>8</sup>



damages to the brain's structure.<sup>12</sup> Researchers have found that even when marijuana users who initiated use during adolescence quit in adulthood, the damage caused by marijuana use in adolescence and young adulthood does not reverse.<sup>12</sup>

Several studies have linked marijuana use during adolescence to mood disorders later in life including bipolar disorder and depression. Long-term use of marijuana is also positively correlated with panic disorders and anxiety.<sup>13</sup>

It is estimated that 9% of people who use marijuana will become dependent on it.<sup>14</sup> Youth who initiate marijuana use between the ages of 12 and 18 are four to seven times more likely to develop a marijuana use disorder than those who wait to use marijuana in adulthood.<sup>15</sup> Long-term marijuana use can lead to addiction, where individuals cannot stop using marijuana, despite its interference in their ability to conduct day-to-day life.<sup>14</sup>

**Fact: States that have legalized marijuana are experiencing public safety issues.**

States that have legalized marijuana use have seen significant increases in motor vehicle crashes involving marijuana, increases in emergency room visits and calls to poison control. Following legalization in Colorado, child exposures to marijuana among those under 6 years old increased by 147.5%.<sup>16</sup> Exposures from edible marijuana (THC) increased by 400% between 2013 and 2014.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, 48 injuries were reported in Colorado related to THC extraction lab explosions.

**Fact: In 2015, 47% of fatal accidents in the US were caused by driving under the influence of drugs.<sup>18</sup> Of crashes where drugs were detected, 35.6% of individuals had recently used marijuana.<sup>14</sup>**

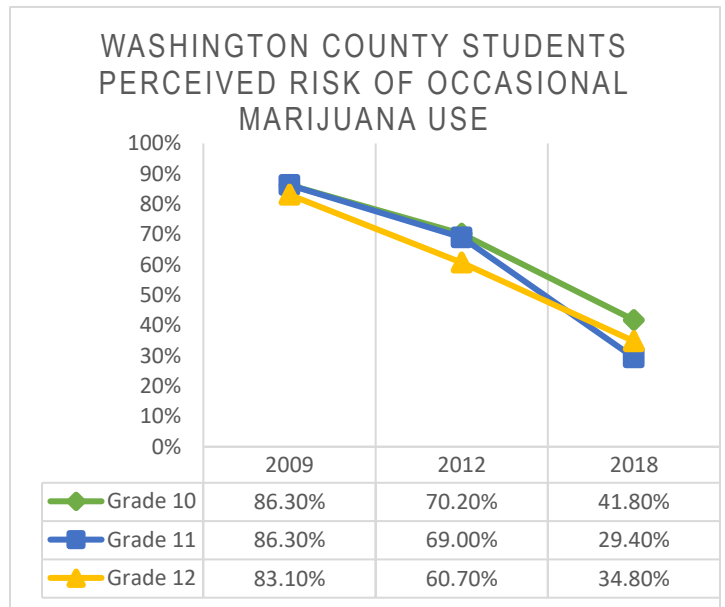
States that have approved medical and/or recreational marijuana use have experienced costly highway safety issues:

- Fatal crashes involving drivers who used marijuana doubled in Washington after the state legalized the drug, according to the latest research by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.<sup>19</sup> New research also shows that legal limits for driving under the influence of marijuana are arbitrary and are not supported by science.<sup>20</sup> This could result in unsafe motorists being released and while others are wrongfully convicted for impaired driving.<sup>20</sup>
- In the same study, 1 in 6 drivers involved in fatal crashes who tested positive for any type of substance use had recently used marijuana.<sup>19</sup>

- Following legalization in Colorado, the number of crashes in which marijuana was involved doubled in the same time frame as alcohol related crashes decreased.<sup>21</sup>

Given that marijuana is already one of the most prevalent illegal drugs detected in impaired drivers and the fact that states that have already implemented medical and/or recreational marijuana laws have seen these numbers drastically increase, marijuana initiatives would only serve to further compromise highway safety.

**Fact: Alongside an increasing number of marijuana initiatives across the country, the percentage of youth that feel that occasional or regular use of marijuana is harmful has seen a significant decrease.<sup>22</sup> An increasing percentage of youth in Washington County, WI over the last 10 years believe that the use of marijuana is not harmful.<sup>23,24,25</sup>**



The environment around acceptance of marijuana use is changing. Following legalization in Washington State, youth in 8th and 10th grades expressed a significant decrease in their perception of risk related to marijuana use as compared to perception of risk prior to legalization. Data from the 2018 Youth Risk Behavior survey indicates that only 38.9% of high school students in Washington County perceive occasional use of marijuana to be harmful, a significant reduction from the over 80% of youth who perceived occasional use as harmful in 2009.<sup>24,25</sup>

## Conclusions

**The Prevention Network of Washington County strongly opposes recreational marijuana legalization.** The costs of substance abuse in the workplace, increased public safety issues and increased healthcare costs are too high. Most importantly, the negative impact legalization would have on youth access to, and initiation of use of marijuana would far outweigh any perceived benefits of legalization. The advancement of public policies supporting marijuana legalization must be opposed because they will:

- Increase the perception that marijuana is safe and harmless to youth;
- Increase the number of youth who begin using marijuana;
- Increase the number of daily users and those dependent upon marijuana; and
- Increase costs to society including public safety, motor vehicle accidents, and healthcare expenditures.

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