

INTRODUCTION

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in the United States. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (formerly called the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse), 95 million Americans age 12 and older have tried “pot” at least once, and three out of every four illicit-drug users reported using marijuana within the previous 30 days.¹

Use of marijuana has adverse health, safety, social, academic, economic, and behavioral consequences. And yet, astonishingly, many people view the drug as “harmless.” The widespread perception of marijuana as a benign natural herb seriously detracts from the most basic message our society needs to deliver: It is not OK for anyone—especially young people—to use this or any other illicit drug.

Marijuana became popular among the general youth population in the 1960s. Back then, many people who would become the parents and grandparents of teenage kids today smoked marijuana without significant adverse effects, so now they may see no harm in its use.

But most of the marijuana available today is considerably more potent than the “weed” of the Woodstock era, and its users tend to be younger than those of past generations. Since the late 1960s, the average age of marijuana users has dropped from around 19 to just over 17. People are also lighting up at an earlier age. Fewer than half of those using marijuana for the first time in the late 1960s were under 18. By 2001, however, the proportion of under-18 initiates had increased to about two-thirds (67 percent).²

Today’s young people live in a world vastly different from that of their parents and grandparents. Kids these days, for instance, are bombarded constantly with pro-drug messages in print, on screen, and on CD. They also have easy access to the Internet, which abounds with sites promoting the wonders of marijuana, offering kits for beating drug tests, and, in some cases, advertising pot for sale. Meanwhile, the

Use of marijuana and other drugs usually peaks in the late teens and early twenties, then declines in later years.⁷⁷

prevalence of higher potency marijuana, measured by levels of the chemical delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), is increasing. Average THC levels rose from less than 1 percent in the mid-1970s to more than 6 percent in 2002. Sinsemilla potency increased in the past two decades from 6 percent to more than 13 percent, with some samples containing THC levels of up to 33 percent.³

Many people who worry about the dangers of heroin or cocaine are less concerned about marijuana, or they consider experimentation with pot an adolescent rite of passage. Such attitudes have given rise to a number of myths in the popular culture. Movies, magazines, and other media commonly show glamorous images and gratuitous use of marijuana, trivializing the risks and ignoring any negative consequences. At the same time, special-interest groups proclaim that smoked marijuana is not only harmless, it's actually good medicine.

Marijuana Myths & Facts looks at 10 popular misperceptions about marijuana and, using the latest research findings and statistical information, explains why they are wrong. The booklet describes the dangers of marijuana and why it is important for society to send a clear, consistent, and credible message to young people about the seriousness of the threat.