Increasing Marijuana Use by Older Adults: Causes for Concern

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Introduction



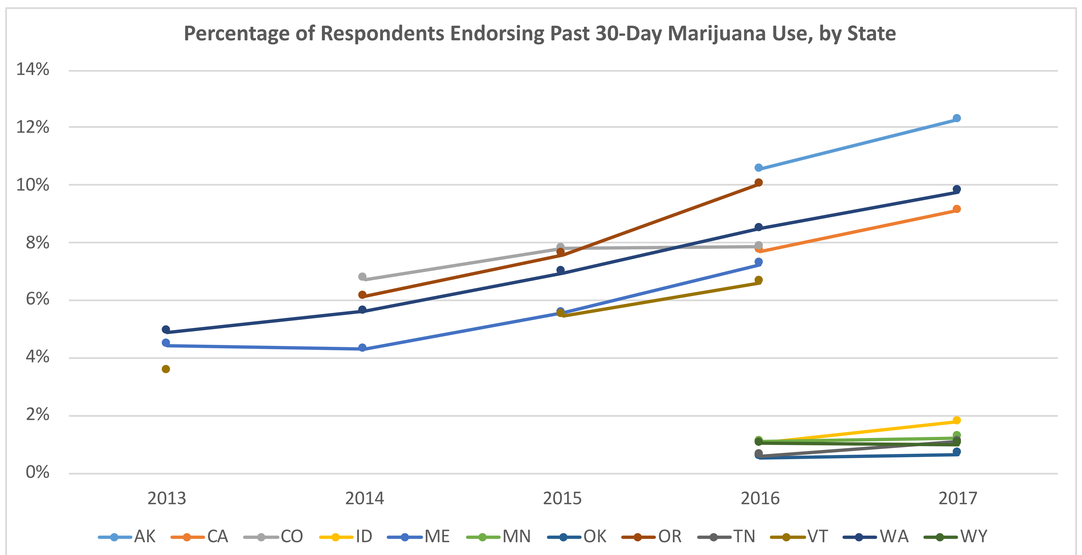
- Marijuana use by older adults is on the rise. Published data from the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) indicate that rates of self-reported marijuana use have increased significantly over the past decade among adults aged 50 to 64 and substantially among adults aged 65 or older.[1,2]
- Notably, of 447,196 individuals in the combined 2006-2013 NSDUH dataset, adults aged 65 or older represented only 4.0% of the sample (n=17,837), and only 154 respondents in that age group (0.8%) reported marijuana use in the past year.
- Examination of data from other sources is important to replicate and extend prior findings, which may indicate an emerging need to prioritize older adults as a population for study. Most research on effects of marijuana has focused on younger adults, findings from which may not generalize to older adults.

Methods

- Using data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BFRSS), which samples a much higher proportion of older adults, we examined whether a similar trend was evident in adults aged 45 and older.
- The BRFSS is an annual survey of over 400k adults directed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), conducted via cellular and landline phone. The CDC began to include past 30-day marijuana use in its national datasets in 2016. Some states collected marijuana use data in years prior. We obtained data for the years 2013 to 2017, to the extent possible.

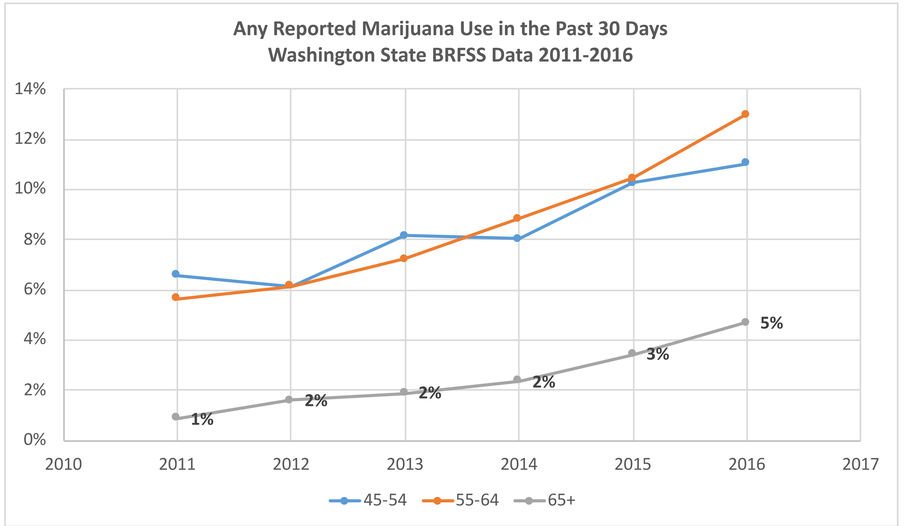
Results

- Twelve states (AK, CA, CO, ID, ME, MN, OK, OR, TN VT, WA, WY) provided data for at least 2 years during that timeframe, enabling examination of trends in use. Furthermore, during this timeframe, 5 states queried driving within 2-3 hours of marijuana use in the past month (CO, VT) or year (CA, OR, WA).
- The highest rates of self-reported past 30 day marijuana use and steepest increases were evident in states with legal non-medical use.



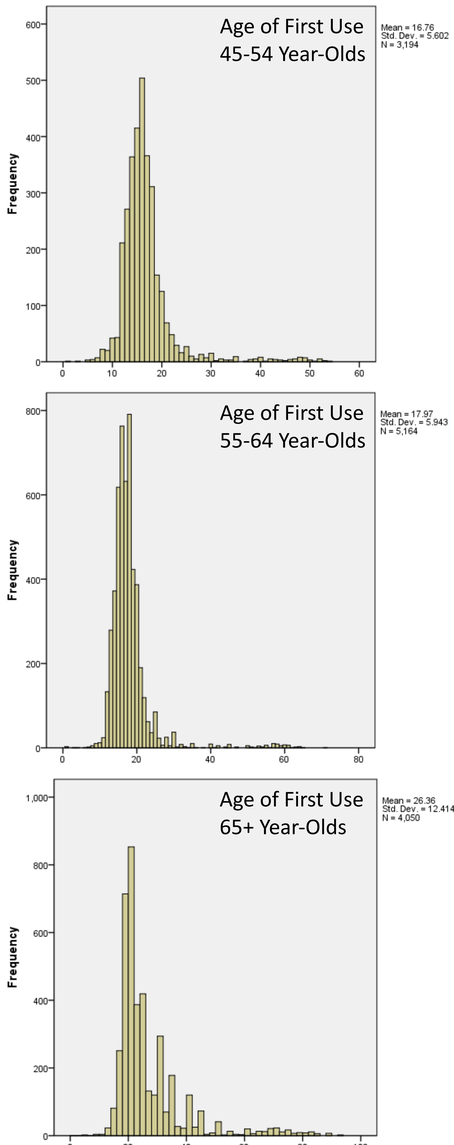
Results

- Across years, approximately 20% of those age 45 and older who reported past 30 day marijuana use reported driving after using marijuana at least once in the past year.
- This percentage held among those aged 45-54, 55-64, and 65+ years and was not substantially lower than the rate of 26% reported among those aged 18-44 years.
- Examining Washington State date from 2011-2016 showed increasing endorsement of recent marijuana use in all subsets of older adults.
- A number of respondents (particularly older respondents) initiating use later in life.



Discussion

- Increasing rates of marijuana use among older adults and high rates of driving after using marijuana, particularly those aged 65+ years are concerning for a number of reasons.
- Marijuana use or intoxication could be problematic for those with age-related vulnerabilities.
  - Many older adults have chronic medical conditions, complex medication regimens, sensory impairments, slowed reaction time, brittle bones, and susceptibility to falls and accidents.
  - Over 10% of older adults aged 60-64 show some age-associated cognitive decline.
- Studies of young adults show marijuana intoxication interferes with judgment and memory, with effects persisting 12-24 hours after use.
  - It is unknown how cognitive effects of marijuana may interact with cognitive effects of aging.
  - Cognitive effects could increase medication errors, accident risk.
- Marijuana use affects drug metabolism and can enhance effects of CNS depressant drugs and alcohol, which is a major concern for accident and fall risk.
- More research is needed to understand the potential risks of marijuana use in this population.



References

1. Han BH, Sherman S, Mauro PM, Martins SS, Rotenberg J, Palamar JJ. Demographic trends among older cannabis users in the US, 2006–13. Addiction. 2017 Mar;112(3):516-2
2. Han BH, Palamar JJ. Marijuana use by middle-aged and older adults in the United States, 2015–2016. Drug and Alcohol Dependence. 2018 Oct 1;191:374-81.

Acknowledgment

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