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Bulletin No. 3 February 1, 2016

Survey on Marijuana Use, Awareness, and Beliefs — Alaska, May 2015

Background

Following the passage of Ballot Measure 2 on November 2, 2014, Alaska became one of four states to legalize the production, sale, and use of recreational marijuana under limited circumstances.¹ The measure is the latest amendment to Alaska's marijuana use laws which have been shaped over the past 40 years by a unique and complex interaction between judicial, legislative, and electoral inputs.^{2,3} With the passage of Measure 2, perceptions about and use of marijuana by Alaskans are likely to change. To track these changes, the Alaska Division of Public Health (ADPH) conducted a survey on marijuana use, awareness, and beliefs among Alaskans prior to the initiation of sale of recreational marijuana (expected to begin in the spring of 2016).

Methods

A 45-question survey was administered by telephone to 750 Alaskans May 5–9, 2015. The questions were of four general types intended to characterize a respondent's a) demographic characteristics, b) use of marijuana, c) awareness of marijuana use laws, and d) beliefs about risks of marijuana use.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Of the 750 respondents, 600 (80%) were reached by landline and 150 (20%) by cellphone. Four hundred and three (54%) self-identified as female and 344 (46%) as male. Mean age was 56.2 years (range: 18–94), with 65% over the age of 50. Six hundred twenty two (83%) self-identified as White, 76 (10%) as Alaska Native/American Indian, 14 (2%) as Black, 13 (2%) as Asian, and 24 (3%) as other. Five hundred and fifty four (74%) had a high school education or higher, and 570 (76%) reported an approximate annual household income of \$50,000 or more. Respondents lived in 29 different boroughs (or census areas) including Anchorage (258, 34%), Fairbanks (98, 13%), Mat-Su (97, 13%), Kenai Peninsula (66, 9%), Juneau (29, 4%), and Kodiak Island (17, 2%).

Use of Marijuana

Of the 165 (22%) respondents who self-identified as current marijuana users, 99 (60%) reported using recreational marijuana within the last 30 days. Of these, 21 (21%) used on only one or two of the last 30 days, and 33 (33%) used every day (Figure 1A). Over the last 30 days, the average number of times recreational marijuana was used per day (on days used) was 2.5. While 47 (47%) respondents reported using an average of only once per day on days used, 20 (20%) used an average of 4–12 times per day. Modes of use reported over the last 30 days included smoking (89, 90%), vaping (10, 10%), consuming edibles (9, 9%), and dabbing (7, 7%).

Awareness of Alaska's Marijuana Use Laws

Awareness of Alaska's marijuana use laws varied (Figure 1B); 660 (88%) respondents knew that marijuana cannot legally be used in a public space, 457 (61%) correctly identified 21 years as the minimum age to legally use marijuana recreationally, and 431 (57%) knew that recreational marijuana could not be legally bought or sold at the time the survey was administered. Only 197 (26%) respondents knew that only 1 ounce or less of marijuana can legally be carried outside of the home.

Beliefs about Risks of Marijuana Use

In general, respondents believed that the health impacts of using marijuana are greater in younger and more frequent users. Five hundred twenty eight (70%) respondents felt that daily use by teenagers was very harmful, and 332 (44%) respondents felt that weekly use by teenagers was very harmful. While 277 (37%) respondents felt that daily use by adults was very harmful, 239 (32%) considered it only somewhat harmful. Similarly, 221 (30%) respondents considered it somewhat harmful for adults to use once per week, and 200 (27%) considered it not harmful at all. The majority (521, 70%) of respondents considered it very harmful to an unborn baby if a pregnant woman used multiple times per week, and most (491, 66%) considered it very harmful to an infant if use occurred while breastfeeding. Four hundred nineteen respondents (56%) were highly concerned about young children accidentally eating edible marijuana. In contrast, only 240 (32%) of respondents were highly concerned about adults or adolescents overdosing on edible marijuana, and 207 (28%) were not concerned at all.

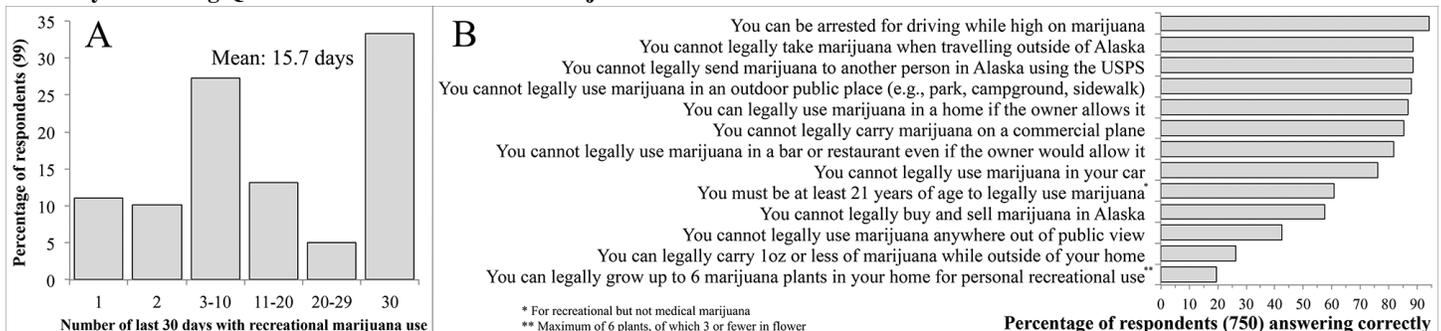
Discussion

This was the first survey administered by ADPH to characterize perceptions about and use of marijuana in Alaska. ADPH plans to repeat the survey in 2016 to track changes over time. For the 2016 survey, some questions will be reworded to more explicitly distinguish between recreational and medical marijuana, and new questions will be added to characterize changes in use, legal awareness, and risks of use, and to assess views about broader impacts of legalizing the sale of recreational marijuana in Alaska. More information about marijuana use in Alaska is available online (see: <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Director/Pages/marijuana/data.aspx>).

References

1. Alaska Department of Commerce, Alcoholic Beverage Control Board (available at: <https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/amco/>).
2. Brandeis, J. Continuing vitality of *Ravin v. State*: Alaskans still have a constitutional right to possess marijuana in the privacy of their homes. *Alaska L Rev* 2012;29:175-236.
3. Brandeis, J. *Ravin* revisited: Alaska's historic common law marijuana rule at the dawn of legalization. *Alaska L Rev* 2015;32:309-47.

Figure 1. Percentage of Survey Respondents (A) Reporting Number of the Last 30 Days on which Recreational Marijuana Was Used and (B) Correctly Answering Questions Related to Alaska's Marijuana Use Laws



(Contributed by Yuri Springer, PhD and Jonathan Bressler, MPH, Section of Epidemiology.)