

# YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON MARIJUANA USE

## Youth Listening Sessions in King County, WA

In an environment in which marijuana is legal for adults, King County youth increasingly believe regular marijuana use is not harmful. Their own use of marijuana varies by race, place, and sexual orientation. While research about youth marijuana use is ongoing, the science is not settled, and conflicting messages often lead to confusion.

This report presents common themes that emerged in 26 listening sessions with King County youth during Spring of 2018. \* The goal was to learn about youth attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs related to marijuana use. The sessions represent a first step in ensuring educational materials about marijuana are clear, consistent, and relevant to youth audiences.

\*All quotes are by King County youth

**26** listening sessions

**202** youth participants

## YOUTH MOTIVES TO USE & NOT USE

### Reasons youth may use

Youth use marijuana to follow social norms & to self-medicate.

- Peer pressure, curiosity, and the feeling that everyone else is doing it.
- Presentation of marijuana use as normal by social media and pop culture.
- Trying to cope with difficult situations - it helps some escape, forget, relieve pain, and deal with anger.

“ [Youth] smoke marijuana for two reasons: either because others are doing it so they want to be cool and fit in. Or to relieve pain. There's people going through struggles.”

### Reasons youth may avoid use

Personal values & protective factors may help prevent marijuana use.

- Concern about negative personal consequences such as reduced access to opportunities (school and sports activities) and support (from engaged parents and non-using friends).
- Knowledge of risks associated with marijuana use.
- Belief that use could violate a personal, family, or religious value or threaten realization of future goals.
- Desire to avoid potential discipline and addiction.

“ One of the main reasons [youth] don't [use] is because they want to do well in athletics, or school, & they won't take drugs because they know they have to succeed, or very much want to.”

# YOUTH BELIEFS ABOUT MARIJUANA

## Perceptions of risk

Most youth do not think marijuana use is a problem & have little concern for its risks.

- Youth are more influenced by marijuana's perceived popularity than by its possible risks.
- Youth report that retail legalization is normalizing marijuana use.
- Youth believe that marijuana has some medical benefits and is not as bad as other substances, especially with infrequent use.

“ It's becoming something almost habitual. Something you're used to seeing. Therefore, it seems normalized... seems okay. Then you think, 'well I can just do it too, and it'll be all right.'”

## Estimates of use

Youth believe that many of their peers use marijuana.

- Youth estimates of use (80% to 100%) are higher than the average of 15% reported by King County students on the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey.<sup>1</sup>
- Peer promotion on Snapchat or Instagram makes marijuana use seem common.
- Participants believe most youth have tried marijuana once or use it socially, but perceive few as regular users.

“ All you hear about is how much people smoke and all you see on social media are pictures of weed and [posts] saying 'hit me up'... and stuff like that. You see it everywhere.”

## Access to marijuana

Youth think that marijuana is easy to get.

- Marijuana is seen as incredibly easy for youth to obtain.
- Youth get marijuana through personal connections, especially peers, siblings, or a person they know who sells.
- Social media often plays a role in marijuana sales, making it easy to identify and contact someone who uses or sells. Legal-age buyers can make lucrative exchanges by reselling marijuana to youth at higher prices.
- Youth sometimes get marijuana through parents who keep it at home.

“ I think it's just so popular nowadays, especially with our age group. So, even if you're not close with anybody, you can just ask around and one out of three people are gonna have it.”

# YOUTH ACCESS TO INFORMATION

## Youth sources of information

Youth mostly rely on media, peers, school, & parents for information on marijuana.

- Media and their peers, followed closely by school and parents.
- Internet searches, social media, articles, advertisements, and music.

Across all information sources, youth are concerned about biased and inconsistent messages. It is difficult to trust sources that appear to have an agenda (including the marijuana industry and health educators). They also distrust information from people who have never used marijuana.

“Most people have their own bubble of influence and what they see. And, a lot of what we see and learn comes from either the people we talk to around us, or what we see on our phones.”

## Information youth want

Youth want more unbiased information about marijuana.

- Unbiased information on how marijuana works, plus long-term effects (such as how it impacts their futures), and short-term effects (such as how it impacts their bodies).
- Research and evidence about marijuana risks and benefits.

“Adults have kind of exaggerated the effects of marijuana to the point where teens want to exaggerate it in the other direction and say it's harmless... which isn't entirely true either. There aren't a lot of people who are very realistic about what it can and can't do.”

## How to share information with youth

Youth want risk messages about marijuana shared in non-lecture formats.

- Provide unbiased information to strengthen trust and increase youth confidence about their decisions. Risk messages are not taken seriously when they seem exaggerated or condescending.
- Instead of lecturing, engage through open discussions and make risk messages relevant.
- Locate messages where youth will easily come across them in their daily lives (examples: Snapchat, magazines).
- Don't use shame or fear tactics, especially with youth who use marijuana to self-medicate.

# NEXT STEPS

The King County Youth Marijuana Prevention and Education Program (KC-YMPEP) greatly appreciates the community partners who organized sessions and the youth participants who shared their valuable insights on youth marijuana use. This project could not have happened without their time and dedication.

A critical component of KC-YMPEP's future efforts will be to address the misperception that youth marijuana use does not involve risk. Since 2004, the proportion of Healthy Youth Survey respondents in King County who believe regular marijuana use is harmful has steadily declined.<sup>1</sup> This finding is consistent with national youth surveys and with what we learned in the listening sessions described here.<sup>2</sup> Key informant interviews and informal research have revealed similar attitudes among the general public in King County.

Contrary to these beliefs and attitudes, research has shown that marijuana use at a young age can negatively impact the health and development of youth. In future work, KC-YMPEP will seek to educate youth, adults, and professionals about these risks, which can include:<sup>3,4</sup>



Long term effects on the developing brain



Negative impacts on school performance, memory, attention, and the ability to think clearly



Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis



Referrals to the criminal justice system - in WA, marijuana is illegal for anyone under 21



Addiction - 1 in 10 marijuana users will become addicted. For people who begin using before the age of 18, the number rises to 1 in 6



Crash risk - marijuana impacts the skills required for safe driving, particularly when combined with alcohol

The listening sessions represent one step towards understanding and taking action on youth perceptions of marijuana, and KC-YMPEP plans to follow up with other communities to learn more. Based on this work, KC-YMPEP will test messages for marijuana prevention and education, and work with partners to determine what is needed for regional education efforts. Follow our work at [www.kingcounty.gov/health/marijuana](http://www.kingcounty.gov/health/marijuana).

For questions on the listening session process or to receive copies of materials, contact Lindsey Greto at [Lindsey.Greto@kingcounty.gov](mailto:Lindsey.Greto@kingcounty.gov).

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1) Engage youth in the development of prevention and education efforts. Youth were interested in having discussions about marijuana use, and appreciated the opportunity to voice their opinions. They also proposed some of their own strategies that went beyond education-based risk messaging. Ideas included:

- Investing more in youth who self-medicate: provide opportunities and help them develop long-term goals so that they feel they have a purpose
- Making more of an effort to penalize adults who sell marijuana to youth
- Increasing prices and placing stricter limitations on marijuana advertisements

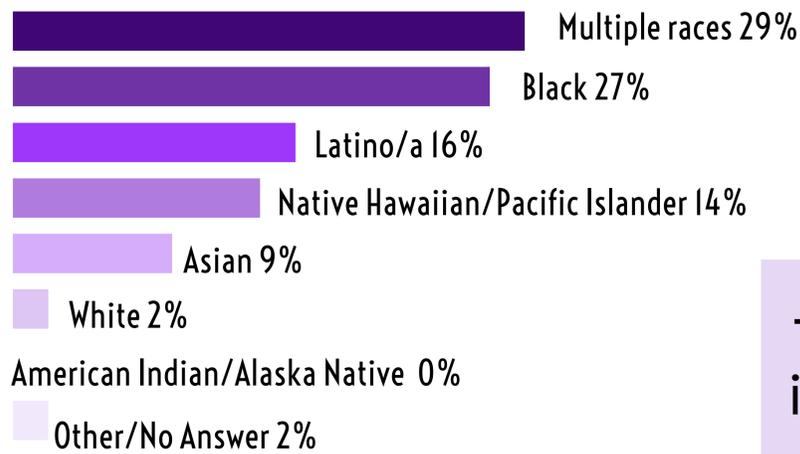
2) Stay involved with KC-YMPEP by visiting our website ([www.kingcounty.gov/health/marijuana](http://www.kingcounty.gov/health/marijuana)) and subscribe to our newsletter.

### REFERENCES

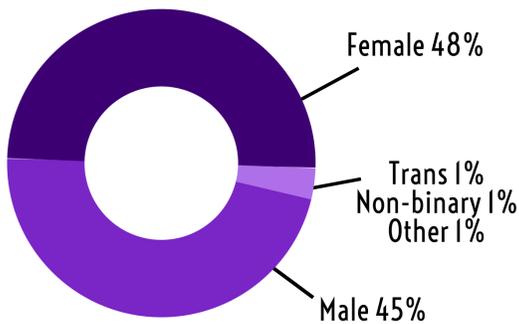
1. Healthy Youth Survey King County data as reported here: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/data/community-health-indicators/healthy-youth-survey.aspx?shortname=Marijuana>
2. Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey national data as reported here: [www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/monitoring-future-survey-high-school-youth-trends](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/monitoring-future-survey-high-school-youth-trends)
3. University of Washington Alcohol & Drug Abuse Institute: <http://learnaboutmarijuanawa.org/factsheets/adolescents.htm>
4. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/marijuana/factsheets/teens.htm>

# PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Most participants were youth of color.



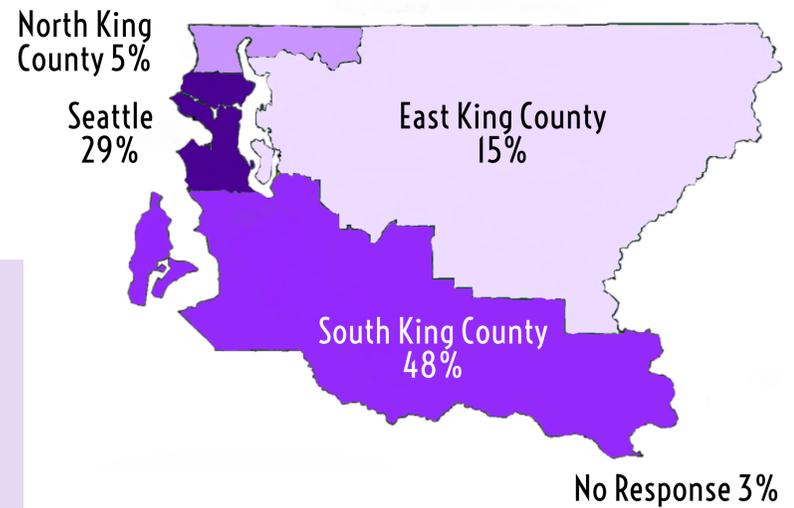
Male and female youth were evenly represented.



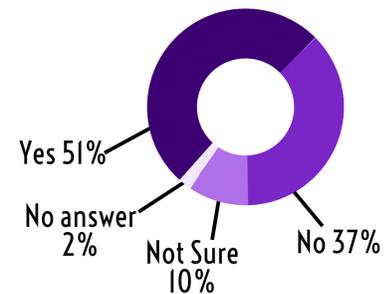
The majority of youth identified as straight.



Youth were mainly from Seattle or South King County.



Half of the youth receive free/reduced lunch at school.



# THE LISTENING SESSION PROCESS

## METHODS

In Spring 2018, KC-YMPEP funded 18 organizations to hold listening sessions with youth in their communities. These sessions were designed to learn more about youth attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs related to marijuana,\* and were specifically focused on communities that experience disproportionate burdens from marijuana use. This report presents key findings from KC-YMPEP's analysis of these 26 sessions.

Funded community organizations were responsible for identifying a facilitator, recruiting participants, running the sessions, and providing KC-YMPEP with a transcript. KC-YMPEP wrote the facilitation script and questions, provided technical assistance and training for facilitators, analyzed the transcripts for themes, and compiled comments from all sessions.

\*Youth were asked to not disclose their personal use or the personal details of other youth who may use marijuana.

## LIMITATIONS

Although we heard perspectives from a wide range of youth in King County, the flexible recruitment process established by KC-YMPEP meant youth participants were not necessarily representative of their communities. These findings can not be generalized to all King County youth. Because transcriptions did not require participant identification for each comment, results could only be analyzed as a whole and could not be broken down into demographic groups. Within the sessions themselves, youth responses may have been influenced by varying facilitation styles and abilities, as well as social desirability bias among youth participants.

## DISCLAIMER

These sessions were meant as an initial exploration of youth perspectives with the goal of informing further inquiry. They were not meant to be evidence-based or to produce scientifically-sound findings. They will serve as a starting point for future KC-YMPEP activities to help us understand youth perspectives on marijuana.