



FOCUS  
For Our Community Unity & Support  
Addiction Prevention Coalition

Focus Group Report

December 2020

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## I. Executive Summary

In fall 2020, following the successful implementation of a series of key informant interviews related to marijuana use in Depew, FOCUS developed a series of focus group questions to further explore the root causes and local conditions that drive youth marijuana use in the community. The coalition chose to pursue focus groups to build youth coalition capacity and use their feedback to select appropriate strategies and activities for intervention.

The FOCUS evaluation team used the information gained from key informant interviews to frame the questions for the focus group. Important takeaways from the key informant interview activities included low perceived risk of marijuana use, changing social norms about marijuana use, parental attitudes favorable to marijuana use, and social access to marijuana.

Building on the results of the key informant interviews, FOCUS leaders decided to use focus group sessions to explore specific aspects of marijuana use in Depew: How do youth obtain marijuana? How do youth use marijuana? Where do youth use marijuana? How do adults in the community feel about marijuana use? Youth answers to these questions are critical to developing both targeted and community-wide prevention strategies and activities.

### Key Findings

- **Low perceived risk of marijuana use** remains a dominant theme in the Depew community. This finding agrees with results from the 2019 Prevention Needs Assessment Survey, where just 60.3% of students associated regular marijuana use with a “moderate” or “great deal” of risk to health, and findings from FOCUS’ key informant interviews, where respondents consistently reported marijuana as a “relatively harmless” substance.
- **Changing social norms about marijuana use** was another prevalent theme throughout interview responses. Respondents frequently cited impending legalization, exposure to pro-marijuana media, reduced stigma of marijuana use, and adult marijuana use as contributors to changes in marijuana attitudes and behaviors among youth.
- **Parental attitudes favorable to marijuana use, social access to marijuana, and available spaces to use marijuana** were also frequently cited by respondents. These issues go hand-in-hand, as favorable attitudes toward use often lead to more avenues to access substances. Additionally, respondents’ feedback on community spaces where marijuana can be used without consequence (everywhere from at home to in school) help to cement marijuana use as an increasingly acceptable behavior in the Depew community.

The data presented in this report may be used in concert with other data FOCUS has collected to provide the best prevention activities and services to the Lancaster/Depew community. For more on suggested ways to use the data in this report, please see *Section IV. Findings and Recommendations*.

## II. Methodology

FOCUS implemented the Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) survey in the Lancaster and Depew School Districts in 2019. Nearly 1,400 students responded; the administration provided invaluable quantitative data on the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of the community's youth.

Quantitative surveys like the PNA yield a wealth of data. Additional data, such as that from focus groups, can provide a deeper understanding of what underlies the numbers and provide important information to inform next steps<sup>1</sup>.

In fall 2020, the FOCUS evaluation team worked with their external evaluator to create a focus group protocol to address gaps in knowledge found through analysis of both the PNA and key informant interviews.

The FOCUS evaluation team created five focus group questions related to marijuana use in the community. The first question served as an icebreaker; each main question contained at least two follow-up questions to elicit further feedback. Additionally, the team prepared an overall protocol containing definitions for key terms, ground rules for administration, and potential probes for the facilitator. The full focus group protocol may be found in *Section V. Appendix*.

FOCUS President Gwendolyn Bork successfully recruited a diverse sample of students in Grades 10 and 12 at Depew High School that was representative of the general student population.

The four main questions posed to respondents were:

1. Overall, how do you think YOUTH in your community view marijuana use?
2. Overall, including youth and adults, how do you think youth marijuana use is viewed in your SCHOOL?
3. Overall, how do you think PARENTS in your community view marijuana use?
4. What are the most popular ways that youth use marijuana in the community (e.g., smoking, edibles, vaping, dabs, etc.)?

FOCUS carried out their first youth focus group in November 2020. FOCUS Social Norms Chairwoman Deborah LaBounty facilitated the groups, with FOCUS President Gwendolyn Bork and FOCUS Coalition Coordinator John Bruso present as observers/notetakers. The focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes; Mr. Bruso recorded the session with participant permission and took notes as necessary.

Data collected through the focus group were analyzed using conventions and codes finalized by the FOCUS evaluation team during the coalition's fall 2020 key informant interviews. Once transcribed, the data were passed to FOCUS' external evaluator for coding, compilation, and reporting.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cadca.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/communityvoicerequalitivedata.pdf>

### III. Results

In this section, results for each focus group question are presented, including major themes and key respondent quotes.

#### **Question 1: Overall, how do you think youth in your community view marijuana use?**

To start, respondents were asked about how youth view marijuana use in the community, especially in light of concerning increases in marijuana prevalence, increased access to marijuana, and decreases in perceptions of harm of marijuana use. This question was also the first question in the key informant interview protocol.

Four themes emerged from this question; each theme and the responses associated with those themes are listed below:

##### Low Perceived Risk of Use

- Marijuana usage can't be that bad, they are going to make it legal soon
- Not all kids use it but many feel it's not a big deal
- Our age group [doesn't] worry about the risk, because it's very common in society
- [Kids] don't worry about the effect it may have on them

##### Social Norms Favorable to Use

- Common at our age to use marijuana
- It will be legal soon
- It's cool to use it
- It's very common in society

##### Social Access

- Students that have older siblings are more likely to try it

##### Extreme Views on Use (either strongly for or strongly against use)

- Two feelings, it's either super bad or not a big deal, feelings are extreme about it

### **Question 1, Follow-Up #1: Where are places students usually smoke marijuana?**

Students were extremely forthcoming with their responses on where youth use marijuana. Responses include:

At Home: Students report using marijuana at home or at friends' homes. If parents are "cool" with their kids smoking marijuana, youth will gravitate to those houses.

In Public: Students report using marijuana in their cars and at most local parks (e.g., Como Park, Firemen's Park, Keysa Park).

At School: Students reported marijuana use on school grounds in multiple locations. The most commonly cited locations were bathrooms and out-of-the-way areas. In higher-traffic areas (e.g., the school cafeteria), students will eat edibles or use other discreet methods to get high.

### **Question 1, Follow-Up #2: Why do they smoke marijuana in these places?**

Students reported using marijuana in these locations more for the effects of the drug than the convenience of the locations. For example, students cited marijuana use as a way to fit in with the crowd, as a way to cope with the stresses of life, and as a more convenient and "flexible" (e.g., vapes, edibles, smoking) way to get high versus other drugs.

### **Question 2: Overall, including youth and adults, how do you think marijuana use is viewed in your school?**

The second series of questions posed to the group related to marijuana use in school. As all students in the focus group were from Depew High School, these responses should be viewed as representative of student perceptions about the acceptability of marijuana use in the Depew High School culture.

Responses by theme are listed below:

#### Negative Attitudes Toward Marijuana

- Some of the kids are definitely against it and won't hang out with kids that use
- Some teachers are very much against it and try to do what they can

#### Favorable Attitudes Toward Marijuana/Lack of Consequences

- Some younger teachers don't think it's that bad and don't do too much to prevent it being used

#### Changing Social Norms

- Kids think it's cool
- Some kids use marijuana distribution as a way to make money
- Some teachers feel vaping is unstoppable and have given up

#### Social Access

- Many kids will post on [social media] that they have [marijuana to sell]

**Question 2, Follow-Up #1: How do adults in your school feel about marijuana use?**

Answers to this follow-up question largely reiterated what was stated in the main question.

Respondents indicated that there are generally two groups of adults – one that is okay with marijuana use and/or feels it’s “unstoppable,” and one that is strongly against marijuana use.

**Question 2, Follow-Up #2: What are the consequences you would face if caught smoking in school?**

Respondents universally indicated that individuals caught smoking marijuana on school grounds would face potentially severe consequences. Respondents listed the following consequences:

- At minimum, you will get detention
- ISS (in-school suspension)
- Kicked off a sports team
- School looks at it on a case-by-case basis, selling is more severe than just smoking
- School would definitely take action if anyone got caught
- You might get suspended if you are a repeat offender

One caveat to the above is the low probability of being caught if using discreet methods of using marijuana (e.g., edibles, vape pens, etc.). Respondents indicated that kids who use marijuana regularly at school favor marijuana delivery methods that are least likely to be noticed.

**Question 3: Overall, how do you think parents in your community view marijuana use?**

The third series of questions related to parental attitudes toward marijuana use. In 2019, 92.9% of students surveyed through the Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) survey indicated that their parents would feel it would be “wrong” or “very wrong” for them to use marijuana. While this is a strong outcome, it is lower than perceived parental disapproval of other substance use – 98.0% for alcohol, 99.0% for cigarettes, and 99.0% for prescription drugs. These questions were developed to better understand why parental attitudes toward marijuana use are laxer than for other substances.

Respondents were somewhat more reserved in their responses to this question than for the others in the focus group protocol. The feedback that was provided, however, complements responses found throughout this report.

- Some parents are openly favorable toward marijuana use and will even smoke with their kids
- Some parents are very against marijuana use
- The majority of parents are generally against, or at least “not fond of,” marijuana use

**Question 3, Follow-Up #1: Why do you think parents feel that way?**

For this follow-up question, respondents shared similar sentiments to the main question – some parents feel that marijuana is totally safe (changing social norms); some parents use/used marijuana themselves and did not suffer overt, long-term effects (similar to traditional responses about alcohol use); and many parents remain against youth marijuana use and/or marijuana use in general.

**Question 3, Follow-Up #2: Why do you think some parents are okay with their kids using marijuana?**

The focus group facilitator followed-up with a question about why some parents are okay with their kids using marijuana. The group largely agreed (through shared body language reactions) with respondents who stated that parents who used marijuana and did not see any overt long-term effects feel that marijuana is not harmful, regardless of the age of the user.

**Question 3, Follow-Up #3: Do you think parents use marijuana in front of their children?**

This follow-up/probe confirmed the above – there are parents who use marijuana in front of their children and/or use marijuana with their children. Additionally, respondents noted that it is not only parents who smoke marijuana in front of their children, but also aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

**Question 4: What are the most popular ways youth use marijuana in the community?**

The final series of questions for the focus group centered on the ways local youth use marijuana. As societal norms related to marijuana possession and use change, and as marijuana use becomes more generally accepted across the United States, the number of marijuana delivery methods continues to rise. As noted in a recent Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) publication<sup>2</sup>, the most common forms of marijuana consumption include:

- Eating (in baked goods, candy, and other food products)
- Liquid/wax (concentrated THC, usually vaporized)
- Smoking (in joints, blunts, spliffs, pipes, etc.)
- Topical applications like creams and oils

Focus group respondents noted vaping as the most common form of use in the Depew community. Respondents said that vaping was now the most common form for four main reasons:

- It is easy to use
- It is easy to hide
- It is hard to detect
- It is so common that it has become a community norm

**Question 4, Follow-Up #1: How do youth get marijuana in these forms?**

Respondents indicated that there are several ways to obtain marijuana in the Depew community, and they are almost exclusively related to social access through friends and family. Specific responses included:

- Older siblings
- Older friends
- Older students with “connections”
- Parents who approve of marijuana use
- Online platforms like Instagram and Snapchat

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.cadca.org/sites/default/files/practical\\_theorist\\_12\\_cannabis\\_the\\_current\\_state\\_of\\_affairs\\_final.pdf](https://www.cadca.org/sites/default/files/practical_theorist_12_cannabis_the_current_state_of_affairs_final.pdf)



**Question 4, Follow-Up #2: How much do parents help youth accessing or using marijuana?**

Respondent feedback to this question focused on a subset of parents who have favorable attitudes towards marijuana use and will therefore provide marijuana to youth and their peers. As with other responses throughout this report, social access and parental attitudes favorable toward marijuana use are major drivers of youth marijuana use in the Depew community.

## IV. Findings and Recommendations

### Findings

The FOCUS coalition’s fall 2020 focus group session resulted in a clear set of respondent themes on why, where, and how youth marijuana use is happening in the Depew community. These themes align not only with national findings on marijuana use<sup>3</sup> but also with findings from the 2019 Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) survey administered in the Lancaster and Depew School Districts and the 2020 key informant interviews performed by the coalition.

Theme 1: Low Perceived Risk – Throughout the answers provided by respondents, there was a clear theme of low perceived risk of marijuana use. This theme manifests itself in several ways, including low perceived risk among youth, low perceived risk among parents, low perceived risk among select school staff, and low perceived risk among adults in the community. As perceived risk declines, prevalence increases.

Theme 2: Social Norms – It is clear from the data collected through the focus group that norms about marijuana use are changing. From teachers and other influential adults in the community feeling like marijuana use is “unstoppable,” to youth attitudes that it will be legal soon so it must be acceptable, there is a clear change in the way marijuana is being viewed and accepted in the community. If the trends found in this report and throughout other FOCUS data collection efforts continue, marijuana may become the “drug of choice” for Depew youth (alcohol has traditionally been the most prevalent youth substance in communities like Depew).

Theme 3: Social Access – Marijuana is becoming more available to youth. This includes the forms of marijuana available for consumption and the avenues to obtain marijuana. As mentioned in the key informant interviews performed earlier in the year, co-occurring youth use of marijuana and alcohol is increasingly common.

Theme 4: Available Spaces for Use – One of the most pertinent findings in this report is the wide range of spaces in the Depew community where youth use marijuana. Parks, parties, friends’ homes, respondents’ homes, and even in school – marijuana delivery methods are more advanced and surreptitious than ever before. As such, it is extremely important for community members to stay current on the ways that youth can use marijuana and signs that youth are using marijuana.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/marijuana/resources>

## Recommendations

The findings in this report, combined with findings from the Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) survey, key informant interviews, and other archival assessment data, demonstrate that there is a clear need in the Lancaster/Depew community for education about marijuana and the dangers of youth marijuana use. Some recommendations for next steps include:

1. Providing education on the risks of marijuana use – It is recommended that FOCUS implement a series of strategies and activities to educate community members on the harmful effects marijuana use has on the developing brain. The research on this subject is growing, but early conclusions are clear – youth marijuana use limits and/or changes brain development.<sup>4</sup>
2. Working to counter messaging in mass media – Youth are affected by media, and advertisers have more ways to target specific audiences than ever before. Add to this the importance that social media sites have to youth, and advertisers have a captive audience vulnerable to effective advertising about marijuana. As a coalition, FOCUS may counter this messaging through local social norming efforts and social marketing campaigns.
3. Working to educate parents – Regardless of a parent’s beliefs about their own marijuana use, it is important to note that youth brains are still developing and, therefore, much more at risk of negative long-term effects from marijuana use. As such, it is recommended that FOCUS engages parents as often as possible to change community norms related to marijuana use.
4. Working to understand and reduce social access – Coalitions like FOCUS must stay up to date on changes in youth behaviors and attitudes. Here, this means understanding how youth are accessing marijuana and working to limit this access. Some recommended actions include ad buys on social media, community education on the dangers of sharing marijuana with youth, and targeted education for school and law enforcement members on the ways to recognize and prevent marijuana use.
5. Working with schools to send clear messages about marijuana use and limit spaces where marijuana may be used – As noted throughout this report, the ways youth can use (and hide) marijuana are ever changing. As such, it is important that school staff are aware of the continually evolving marijuana industry and the products they produce. While youth appear convinced that they would be punished for marijuana use in schools, there appears to be a strong belief that there are spaces on school grounds where youth can successfully use marijuana without being caught.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/marijuana/what-are-marijuanas-long-term-effects-brain>

## V. Appendix

### FOCUS Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I asked to talk with you because you can give very valuable input on why, where, and how youth use marijuana in our community. Your feedback will be kept confidential and anonymous, and it will be used only for substance use prevention planning for youth in the Lancaster/Depew community.

#### GROUND RULES:

- **We are here to listen.** We would like hear from everyone today. If you have not spoken in a bit, I may ask for your opinion on an answer.
- **There are no right or wrong answers.** Every person's opinion is important, and we would like to hear as much input from you as possible. If you hear something you disagree with, please speak up.
- **What is said here stays here.** Your opinions will not be shared with anyone outside this room. Your answers will be compiled by our data analyst, but the analyst will not know who said what in the room today.

#### KEY TERMS:

Community – The Depew School District area

Marijuana Use – Using ANY form of marijuana (smoked, vaped, eaten, etc.)

Consequence – Something that happens as a result of your actions

1. ICEBREAKER - What is everyone's favorite pizza place in Depew?
2. Overall, how do you think **YOUTH** in your community view marijuana use?  
Follow-up 1: Where are places that students usually smoke marijuana?  
Follow-up 2: Why do they smoke marijuana in these places?
3. Overall, including youth and adults, how do you think youth marijuana use is viewed **in your SCHOOL**?  
Follow-up 1: How do **ADULTS** in your school feel about marijuana use?  
Follow-up 2: What are the consequences you would face if caught smoking marijuana **AT SCHOOL**?
  - o If kids say there would be no consequences, why not?
  - o If kids use marijuana regularly at school, **how** do they use it?
  - o If kids use marijuana regularly at school, **where** do they use it?
4. Overall, how do you think **PARENTS** in your community view marijuana use?  
Follow-up 1: Why do you think parents feel this way?  
Follow-up 2: Do you think parents are ok with their kids using marijuana? Why?  
Follow-up 3: Do you think parents use marijuana in front of their children?
5. What are the most popular ways that youth use marijuana in the community (e.g., smoking, edibles, vaping, dabs, etc.)?  
Follow-up 1: How do youth get marijuana in these forms?  
Follow-up 2: How much do parents help youth in accessing or using marijuana?