



FOCUS
For Our Community Unity &
Support Addiction Prevention
Coalition

Focus Group Report

October 2023

Prepared by:



Catalyst Research, LLC

I. Executive Summary

In spring of 2023, For Our Community Unity & Support Addiction Prevention Coalition (FOCUS) conducted a focus group to explore marijuana use by Depew youth. These analyses were conducted to further understand where youth get marijuana, what brands are most popular, and if they think it is safe to consume.

Eight Depew youth participated in the qualitative data collection exercises. Participants for focus groups were chosen based on knowledge of the community and local youth trends. FOCUS developed formal questions and protocols for administering the qualitative data collection sessions to ensure quality, actionable results.

Areas explored by FOCUS during the sessions were availability of four marijuana delivery methods (smoked, vaped, ingested, “dabbed”/oils), familiarity with marijuana brands, perception of safe use and why participants chose to respond as they did. Answers to these questions are critical to developing both targeted and community-wide education on youth cannabis use.

KEY FINDINGS



Marijuana is readily available to youth. Parents, friends and siblings, parties, Snapchat stories and social groups are common sources. Marijuana is available in edible, smokeable, and vape forms. Although past 30-day use by Depew youth is lower than the national average (8.8%, 11% respectively), use is increasing again nationally after a decline during the 2019 COVID pandemic. The legalization of recreational marijuana in New York State along with 43.3% of youth reporting parental attitudes are favorable toward drug use set the stage for increased access. ⁱ



Youth have limited knowledge about the safety of marijuana use. Most of the responses about the safety of marijuana products referred to concerns about the products being laced with other substances if accessed from sources other than dispensaries. While this may be true, there are many other risks pertaining to underage use. It is illegal to use marijuana under age 21; it is also unsafe. Impacts on the developing brain and academic success, increase in mental health issues, and the potential for risky behaviors and addiction are well-documented consequences of continued marijuana use. ⁱⁱ



Overall, there is significant need for community education about marijuana in the Depew community. This was perhaps the clearest theme that emerged from the data collected. There is a need for community-wide education about the many risks of marijuana use. For example, parents may benefit from education on the liability of providing and allowing youth to use marijuana in the home (social host ordinance) and how to safely store adult marijuana products. Youth may benefit from education about the developing brain as well as differential and universal risks of various marijuana delivery methods. Community awareness about the many risks of underage use is important to minimize consumption and consequences while changing community norms about the safety of youth marijuana use.

II. Findings

In this section, major themes identified during focus group analysis are discussed. Select respondent quotes are provided for context.

Theme 1: Youth access different forms of marijuana from many sources.

Marijuana use has changed drastically in recent years. Potency has increased 4-fold – cannabis samples seized by the DEA from 1995 to 2021 show an increase in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) percent from 3.96% (1995) to 15.34% (2021) ⁱⁱⁱ. While smokeable marijuana is still used, edibles, vaping and oils are now available as alternative delivery modes. Underage use has risen while the perception of harm has decreased substantially ^{iv}. Results of the Community Level Youth Development (CLYDE) survey administered in 2021 to Depew students showed that 8.8% of 8th, 10th and 12th graders had used marijuana in the past 30 days (5.6%, 5%, 14.4% respectively). More than 40% perceived that there is little or no risk in using marijuana. Recreational use of cannabis in New York State has become legal. As consumption of and access to marijuana increase, important local questions are raised, including: What modes of delivery are Depew youth using? From whom or where do they get their product and which brands are preferred? What do they believe is “safe” use?

Selection of appropriate, evidence-based strategies to impact underage use requires a data-driven approach. A focus group protocol was created by the coalition to provide qualitative data to fill in the gaps about youth marijuana access and preferred delivery methods. Students noted that parents, older friends, siblings, and parties were common sources for edibles, smokeable marijuana and vapes/cartridges:

- Coming from 18-19 year olds and it gets passed down
- House parties; Older kids parties with no parents around
- It is sold on Snapchat stories
- Parents allow it, creating a safe space to smoke it; parents provide joints, cartridges, weed pens, flowers
- Parents growing in yard
- Social groups have access
- Youth attend parties where marijuana is sold

Theme 2: There is a need for community wide education on each of the delivery modes.

The four modes of delivery discussed in the focus groups were edibles, smokeable, vapes/cartridges, and oils. Youth were asked where each comes from, which brands are popular and whether they believe each delivery method is safe.

According to the coalition’s most recent youth survey data, almost 3% of youth reported using edibles in the past 30 days. Edibles are available on social media, from older youth, social groups, and can be homemade. They produce a longer high and have a slow onset of effect, which may result in taking more than intended. Inconsistent dosing may also vary by serving size. ^v Trusting a source due to the possibility of the product being laced with another substance was cause for concern for safety by participants. Homemade items like cookies and brownies are popular. These contain the oils from the marijuana flower. Prepackaged brands such as Sour Patch Kids, gummies and M&Ms are commonly used.

Youth are smoking marijuana by traditional methods using joints, blunts and bowls. Bongs are not used as often because they are “too hard to hide.” A joint is a cannabis cigarette often hand-rolled by the user but can also be purchased pre-rolled. A blunt is rolled with thick, dark tobacco paper like a cigar. A bowl is part of a pipe that holds the marijuana. It only takes minutes after consumption to begin to feel the effects, which can last up to 6 hours with some residual effects lasting as long as 24 hours. The cannabis is inhaled into the lungs and absorbed directly into the bloodstream, so the effects are quickly felt by the brain and body. Some respondents report that it is safe to consume this form if it comes from a dispensary. Youth believe that safety can be compromised when it comes from other sources. “Putting it into your lungs,” bad reactions and lacing were identified as potential consequences when getting marijuana from unknown sources.

According to national Monitoring the Future (MTF) 2022 results, vaping marijuana increased for 8th and 12th graders to pre-pandemic levels for past 30-day use. Tenth graders increased but not to pre-pandemic levels. In Depew, 6.2% of youth reported vaping marijuana in the past 30 days. Marijuana concentrates are increasingly being used in vaping devices. Many users prefer the vaping device because it is less harsh, smokeless, sometimes odorless, and easy to hide or conceal.

A marijuana concentrate is a highly potent THC concentrated mass (THC is the psychoactive substance in marijuana). It can contain extraordinarily high THC levels ranging from 40 to 80%. This form of marijuana can be up to four times stronger in THC content than high grade or top shelf marijuana flower, which normally measures around 20% THC.^{vi} Parties, parents, friends, and relatives are sources for vapes and cartridges. Disposable cartridges and dispensary products are believed to be safe to use – “prepackaged, so harder to taint because it would taste or smell different; can purchase without fear”.

Students did not seem to know much about marijuana oil use in the community. They do not feel it would be safe to use.

Theme 3: There is a need for community wide education on the risks of consumption.

One important theme that resulted from the data is the lack of awareness about the many risks of underage marijuana consumption. There is a common thread across delivery modes that use is unsafe because the product may be “laced” with something depending on the source. Participants expressed that marijuana is safe if it is prepackaged or purchased through a dispensary. Many of the most important risks of use were not included in participant responses. The teen brain is actively developing and continues to develop until around age 25. Marijuana use during adolescence and young adulthood may harm the developing brain. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ^{vii}, negative effects of teen marijuana use include:

- Difficulty maintaining attention
- Difficulty thinking and problem-solving
- Mental health problems such as depression and social anxiety
- Problems with memory and learning
- Problems with school and social life
- Reduced coordination
- Risk of developing marijuana use disorder/addiction during youth or adolescence

Other risks for adolescents and teens include academic failure, risk of using other drugs, poisoning due to accidental ingestion of edibles that look like other snacks, and impaired driving.

Depew youth survey results showed that while rates of *riding* in a car with someone that has consumed alcohol vs marijuana were similar (9.6%, 9.4% respectively), there was a substantial increase in *driving* a car after consuming alcohol vs marijuana (1%, 2.8% respectively). Marijuana use can impair important skills required for safe driving by slowing reaction time and ability to make decisions, impairing coordination, and distorting perception.^{viii}

III. Recommendations - Connecting Findings to Action

Recommendations are provided below to address underage marijuana consumption and consequences:

1. Youth committee on the FOCUS coalition to create messaging campaigns.

Strategic Prevention Framework focus area(s): Assessment, Planning and Implementation

Seven Strategies for Community Change focus area(s): Providing Information

Development of targeted messaging for community youth to create awareness of the risks of underage consumption and unintended consequences. These messages will be disseminated over social media, printed brochures and posters, and other means that the youth identify for effectiveness.

2. Targeted messaging for parents and other adults in the community.

Strategic Prevention Framework focus area(s): Assessment, Capacity, Planning, Implementation

Seven Strategies for Community Change focus area(s): Providing Support, Enhancing Skills

Development of messaging for community members to create awareness of where youth are accessing marijuana, what delivery modes are used and the risks for each, the risks of underage use and existence of a social host ordinance.

3. Develop a social norms messaging campaign.

Strategic Prevention Framework focus area(s): Assessment, Capacity, Planning, Implementation

Seven Strategies for Community Change focus area(s): Providing Information and Support, Enhancing Skills, Educating/Informing about Modifying/Changing Policies or Laws

More than 90% of youth in the Depew community choose not to use marijuana. Many youths believe that most of their peers use marijuana. Messages about “why” most do not use may influence their peers’ decision making. Creating awareness about the potency of marijuana today compared to that of previous decades may influence parents’ belief that they are providing “safe” use for their children.

It is recommended that the coalition follow up on this data collection effort in spring 2024 to track how youth opinions and feelings have changed over time. In addition to focus groups and key informant interviews, it is recommended that FOCUS continue to administer the CLYDE Survey, consider conducting a community adult survey, and create goals and objectives to reduce underage substance use in the Depew community.

ⁱ Community Level Youth Development Evaluation (CLYDE) 2021, <https://forourcommunitytoday.org>

ⁱⁱ Marijuana and Public Health, <http://cdc.gov/marijuana/health-effects/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ National Institute on Drug Abuse, <https://nida.nih.gov/research/research-data-measures-resources/cannabis-potency-data>

^{iv} Monitoring the Future, <http://monitoringthefuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/mtfoverview2022.pdf>

^v National Marijuana Initiative, https://www.thenmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/practical_theorist_12_cannabis_the_current_state_of_affairs_final.pdf

^{vi} Drug Enforcement Agency, https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/VapingMarijuana_Brochure_2019_508.pdf

^{vii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/marijuana/health-effects/index.html>

^{viii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/marijuana/factsheets/pdf/MarijuanaFactSheets-Driving-508compliant.pdf>