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Social Norms
and
Alcohol and Marijuana Use
Among High School Students

Results from the 2023 Evalumetrics Youth Survey

January 2025

Evalumetrics Research Brief EYS-23-005

Summary –

Student survey responses were analyzed to identify the relationship between social norms and reported use of alcohol and marijuana. Results of analysis of data from the 2023 Evalumetrics Youth Survey are consistent with the notion that social norms, e.g., perceived use by friends, perceived peer disapproval, are related to reported use of alcohol and marijuana. Prevention strategies that are intended to correct misperceptions have the potential to reduce use of alcohol and marijuana.

Background-

Young people's use of alcohol and other substances is a complex issue. No single factor can predict who will and who will not decide to use alcohol or marijuana. Results from the 2023 Evalumetrics Youth Survey[1] indicated that of 3,250 high school students in 35 rural schools in upstate New York, 26.2% reported drinking alcohol in the past year and 11.6% reported use in the past 30 days. Among high school students, 18.6% reported smoking marijuana in the past year and 10.7% reported marijuana use in the past 30 days. Root cause analyses in which 30 risk and protective factors[2] were cross tabulated with reported use of substances, found that the factors that have the strongest relationship to reported alcohol use were Lack of Attachment to School and Friends Use Drugs (including alcohol). High school students who scored above the risk level on the Friends Use Drugs scale were 5.2 times more likely to report using alcohol in the past 30 days.

Substance abuse prevention strategies often use information about the harmful effects of substances. Other prevention strategies attempt to reduce risk factors or increase protective factors, and many environmental strategies are intended to control access to substances through laws or policies. Strategies that are intended to correct young people's misperceptions about their peers' use of substances are based on the social norms model[3,4].

What are social norms? One definition is, *"Social norms are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behaviour. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are therefore situated at the interplay between behavior, beliefs and expectations."*[5]

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[1] See www.evalumetrics.org

[2] Hawkins, J.D., Catalano, R.F., and Miller, J.Y., *Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: implications for substance abuse prevention.* Psychol Bull. 1992 Jul;112(1):64-105.

[3] Weschler, H; Nelson; Lee, Jae Eun; Sebring; Lewis & Keeling (2003). "Perception and Reality: A National Evaluation of Social Norms Marketing Interventions to Reduce College Students Heavy Alcohol Use" (PDF). Journal of Studies on Alcohol. 64 (4): 484–494.

[4] Berkowitz, A. D. (2005). "An overview of the social norms approach". In L. Lederman & L. Stewart (Eds.), Changing the culture of college drinking: A socially situated health communication campaign (193–214). Creskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.

[5] https://www.unicef.org/media/111061/file/Social-norms-definitions-2021.pdf

Method –

A social norms approach to prevention of alcohol and marijuana requires the use of data representing the perceptions and behaviors of the target population. In the spring of 2023, 3,250 high school students in 35 school districts in the Finger Lakes and Southern Tier of New York completed the Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS). In addition to self-reported prevalence of use of alcohol and other substances, students were asked how many of their friends used alcohol or marijuana.

Results –

Perception of peer use - Table 1 shows the prevalence of use of alcohol and marijuana in the past 12 months for students who perceived that their friends did not use, compared to students who reported most of their friends had used alcohol or marijuana. One in seven high school students (13.4%) who said none of their friends drank alcohol reported that they had used alcohol in the past year. More than half (57.6%) of students who perceived that most of their friends drank reported use in the past 12 months. Thus, students who thought that most of their friends drank in the past year were 4.3 times more likely to drink. Students who perceived that most of their friends drank in the past month were 8.3 times more likely to report that they drank in the past 30 days also (2.3% vs. 33.2%).

The results for marijuana use are similar. One in 20 (5.3%) students who said none of their friends smoked marijuana in the past year also reported that they used marijuana compared to more than half (53.8%) of students who said most of their friends had used in the past year. Thus, students who perceive friends used marijuana were 10.2 times more likely to use marijuana. Only 2.3% of students who said that none of their friends had used marijuana in the past month reported they also had used in the past 30 days compared to more than one in three (36.6%) of those who said most of their friends had used. Students who perceived that most of their friends used marijuana in the past 30 days were 15.9 times more likely to report they had also used.

Table 1 Perceived Use	No Friends Used	Most Friends Used	Ratio
Drank in Past Year	13.4%	57.6%	4.3
Drank in Past 30 Days	4.0%	33.2%	8.3
Smoked Marijuana in Past Year	5.3%	53.8%	10.2
Smoked Marijuana in Past 30 Days	2.3%	36.6%	15.9

Perceived Use By Others and Prevalence of Substance Use
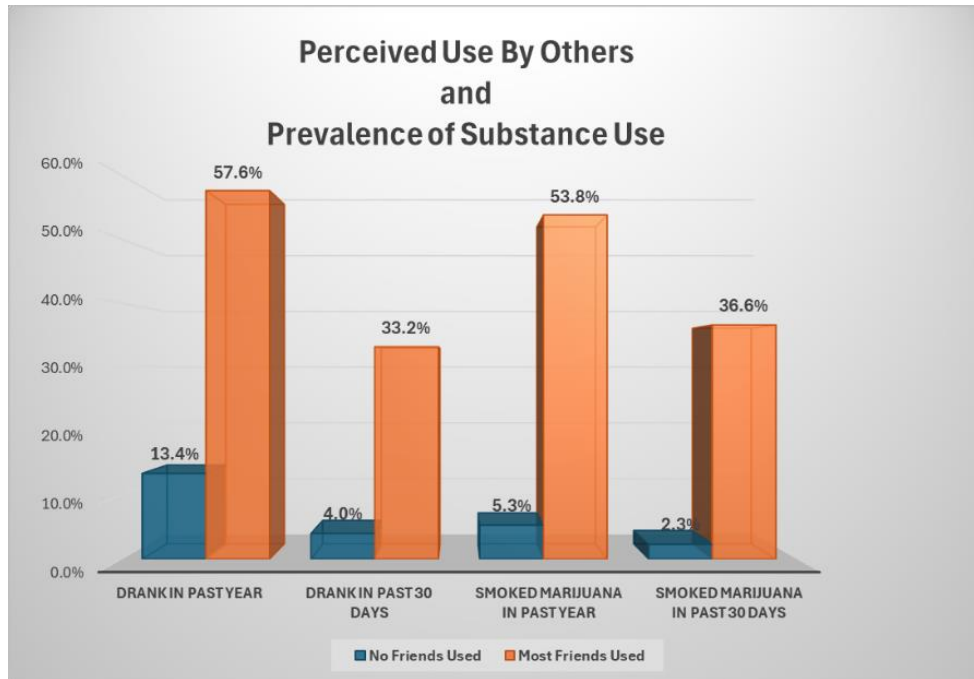
Perception of peer disapproval - Students were asked if their peers thought that use of alcohol or marijuana is "wrong." Table 2 shows that among students who believed that their peers disapproved of drinking alcohol, i.e., "wrong" or "very wrong", 6.4% reported they drank in the past year compared to nearly half (46.5%) of students who perceived that their peers do not disapprove. Thus, students who lack a perception of peer disapproval were 7.3 times more likely to drink in the past year and 11.3 times more likely (1.9% vs. 21.5%) to drink in the past 30 days.

Fewer than one in 20 (3.8%) students who said their peers disapprove of marijuana use reported using marijuana in the past year while more than four in 10 (42.2%) students who did not perceive peer disapproval reported use. Thus, students who do not perceive peer disapproval were 11.1 times more likely to use marijuana in the past year and 18.2% more likely to report use in the past 30 days (1.4% vs. 25.5%).

Table 2 Peer Disapproval	Friends Disapprove	Friends Do Not Disapprove	Ratio
Drank in Past Year	6.4%	46.5%	7.3
Drank in Past 30 Days	1.9%	21.5%	11.3
Smoked Marijuana in Past Year	3.8%	42.2%	11.1
Smoked Marijuana in Past 30 Days	1.4%	25.5%	18.2

Peer Disapproval and Prevalence of Substance Use
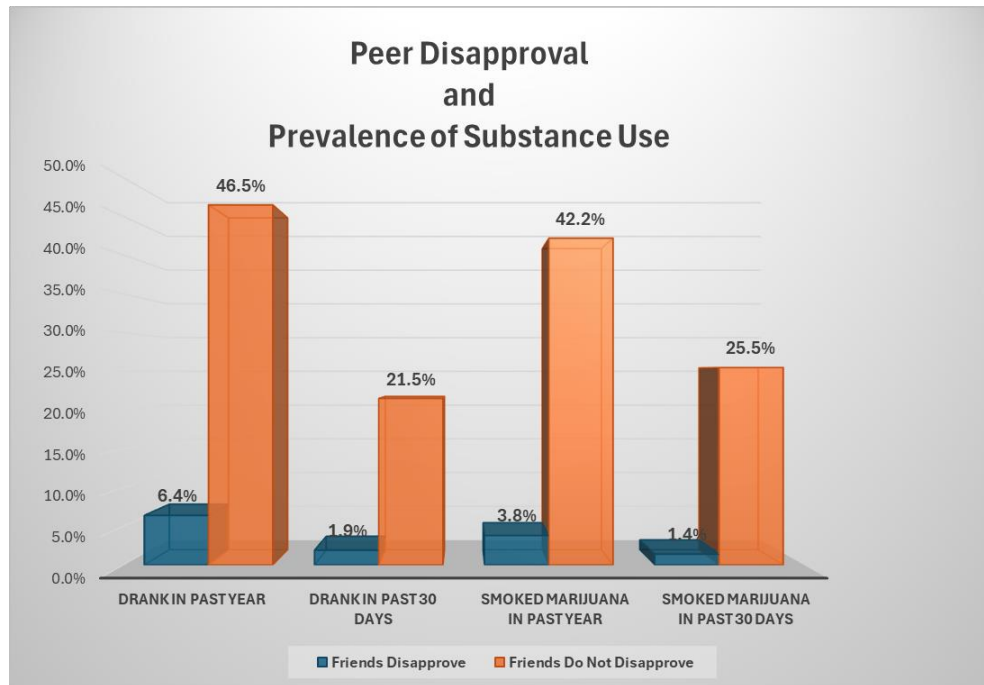
Discussion -

Results of analysis of data from the Evalumetrics Youth Survey are consistent with the notion that social norms, e.g., perceived use by friends, perceived peer disapproval, are related to reported use of alcohol and marijuana. Prevention strategies that are intended to correct misperceptions have the potential to reduce use of alcohol and marijuana.