

The association between early conduct problems and early marijuana use in college students

MAJOR FINDINGS:

The researchers had two goals when they began this study. The first was to measure how often college students reported having early behavior problems. Second, they tested the possible association between early conduct problems and early marijuana use in a college student sample. It is important to understand how early marijuana use might be related to conduct problems in college students, because less severe levels of conduct problems might have adverse consequences, even among academically-achieving youth.

First-year college students ($n=1,076$) were asked about 16 different conduct problems they may have experienced prior to turning 18. Two problems were endorsed by a majority of the students interviewed: breaking rules (84%) and lying to get something or avoid responsibility (84%). A large minority of students also endorsed the following conduct problems: taking property belonging to others (48%); hurting others physically (39%); bullying, threatening, or trying to intimidate another person (33%); shoplifting (27%); damaging property on purpose (27%); stealing something from someone (27%); and starting fights with other people (24%). Nearly half of participants (48.9%) had used marijuana at least once and 7.3% were early marijuana users, meaning their first use was prior to age 15.

Conduct problems were associated with increased risk for being an early marijuana user, relative to both non-users and late-onset users, even controlling for behavioral dysregulation (a measure of how well a person can self-regulate their behavior), demographics, and religiosity. However, late-onset users were no different from non-users with regard to conduct problems. Both early and late marijuana users had significantly higher levels of behavioral dysregulation and lower religiosity than non-users.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Practice and Policy Suggestions: Early conduct problems might be a marker for a higher-risk trajectory of marijuana use—one that is likely to lead to marijuana dependence and other drug involvement later in young adulthood—even if the child is academically achieving and on a college-bound track. Parents should be provided information about how to assess their child’s risk for early marijuana use. They should be encouraged to pay particular attention to early conduct problems and respond with appropriate levels of vigilance and monitoring.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Falls, B.J., Wish, E.D., Garnier, L.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Arria, A.M. (2011). The association between early conduct problems and early marijuana use in college students. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Substance Abuse*. 20(3), 221-236.



About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.¹ Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland School of Public Health at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin and Brittany Bugbee and disseminated by the Treatment Research Institute (TRI), a non-profit research and development group specializing in science-driven transformation of treatment and policy in substance use/abuse. Click [here](#) to learn more about TRI.

