The social context of cannabis use: Relationship to cannabis use disorders and depressive symptoms among college students

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Cannabis Use Disorders (CUD) are defined as meeting DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for either abuse or dependence. The present goal of this study was to explore social or psychological factors that might contribute to CUD or other cannabis related problems. By using the Social Context of Drinking Scales as a guide, the researchers were able to develop a Social Context of Cannabis Use Scale for college students, which allowed them to study a rarely investigated aspect of CUD among college students.

The researchers used data collected from 293 cannabis-using students in three consecutive assessments (baseline and follow-ups at 6 and 12 months). Based on data from a series of questions mapping to the DSM-IV criteria for CUD, researchers categorized students as either non-problematic cannabis users or problem users (i.e., CUD cases). 75 students were classified as non-problematic users at both baseline and follow-up. There were 72 users who met the criteria for CUD at both assessments. The researchers classified 35 students as converters, meaning they were non-problematic users at the baseline, but met criteria for CUD at follow-up. (The remaining 111 students did not meet inclusion criteria for the present analyses.)

The researchers assessed cannabis use frequency within four possible contexts of cannabis use: social facilitation, peer acceptance, emotional pain, and sex seeking. The data showed that social facilitation was the most common context. The researchers found some significant differences between CUD cases and non-problematic users. Namely, students who were consistent CUD cases were more likely to use cannabis in contexts of social facilitation and emotional pain. Students classified as converters were also more likely to use cannabis in a context of social facilitation than non-problematic users. The research also showed that students who were depressed were more likely to use cannabis in a context of emotional pain and sex seeking than non-depressed students. Interestingly, depression was also associated with using cannabis in a context of peer acceptance, but only among males. The researchers also discovered that using cannabis in an emotional pain context was a significant predictor of depression, independent of gender, cannabis use frequency, and alcohol use.

Of major interest to:
☑ **College Administrators**
☐ **Parents**
☐ **Educators**
☑ **Health Professionals**
☐ **Students**
☐ **Law and Policy Makers**

Practice and Policy Suggestions: This study shows that cannabis is used in the context of social facilitation, but as the study points out, the risk of problematic use is higher for those students who frequently use cannabis in a social situation. This means that colleges and universities should address these concerning habits before they become a more serious issue. College mental health professionals should try to identify early and treat depressed students who are also using cannabis. To help with this identification process, the scales presented in this study may be a useful screening tool for identifying students who may be at risk for developing a problem in the future.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Beck, K.H., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D., Arria, A.M. (2009). The social context of cannabis use: Relationship to cannabis use disorders and depressive symptoms among college students. *Addictive Behaviors*. **34(9), 764-768.**

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, College Park, 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, University of Maryland School of Journalism

The Center on Young Adult Health and Development
University of Maryland School of Public Health
www.cyahd.umd.edu