SAM Smart Approaches to Marijuana
preventing another big tobacco

CO-USE · ADDICTION · PUBLIC POLICY

Marijuana and Other Drugs

Marijuana rarely travels alone. The pattern in federal surveys and cohort studies: **earlier use, heavier use, and more use of other drugs**. And the **"exit drug"** claim has now been tested.

THE LADDER · THREE STUDIES, ONE PATTERN[1,2,3]

13

Age when substance use takes off

NIH ABCD COHORT, 12,000 KIDS

10.7%

Of teens have a cannabis use disorder within 12 months of first use

JAMA PEDIATRICS · NEARLY 2× THE ALCOHOL RATE

4.2×

Higher odds of opioid use disorder if first use came before 15

ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS · RANGE 1.6 TO 4.2×

NIH ABCD STUDY · AGE 16[4]

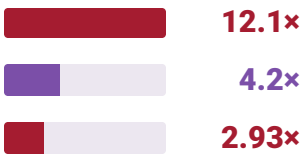
7 in 10



Sixteen-year-olds who use nicotine also use marijuana

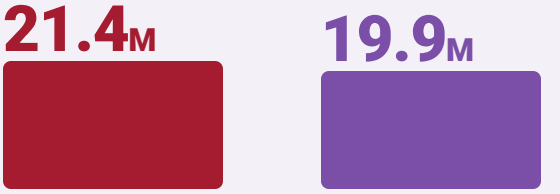
Vaping delivers both through the same device. Nearly 4 in 10 kids have used a substance by 16.

RELATIVE ODDS VS. NON-USERS[1,5,6]



Marijuana users are far more likely to use, and be harmed by, other drugs

SAMHSA · 2025 NSDUH[7]



Daily marijuana users

Daily cigarette smokers

For the first time, more Americans use marijuana daily than smoke cigarettes daily

THE LANCET PSYCHIATRY · 54 RANDOMIZED TRIALS[8]



54 trials

No effective cannabinoid treatment for opioid use disorder, anxiety, depression, PTSD, or psychosis

1 in 7 patients had an adverse event beyond placebo. The "exit drug" claim fails the test.

WHAT SAM RECOMMENDS

21+

Keep the minimum age at 21 and fund **school-based prevention for ages 12 to 16**, when use takes off.

THC

Cap potency in statute and ban flavored vapes, the device that ties nicotine to marijuana.

OUD

Reject "marijuana for opioid use disorder" as a qualifying condition or treatment claim. The trials do not support it.

What it means

The pattern holds across studies

These are associations from observational research. No single study proves that marijuana alone causes later drug use. But the direction is the same in federal surveys, hospital records, and a 12,000-child brain-development cohort: the earlier and heavier the marijuana use, the more likely the use of other drugs and the worse the outcomes.

Two things changed the picture. Today's products are far more potent than a generation ago, and vaping now delivers nicotine and THC through the same device to the same kids. Marijuana is now America's second-largest addiction, behind only alcohol.[7]

The "exit drug" claim

The industry argues marijuana helps people leave opioids. The best evidence says otherwise. A 2026 review of 54 randomized trials found no effective cannabinoid treatment for opioid use disorder, and warned that routine prescribing "could be doing more harm than good."[4] Meanwhile, early marijuana use is one of the strongest predictors of later opioid use disorder.[1]

Policy should follow the evidence: prevent early use, keep potency in check, and treat opioid addiction with medicines that work.

WHAT SAM RECOMMENDS

- Keep the minimum age at 21 everywhere, and fund school-based prevention aimed at ages 12 to 16, when use takes off.
- Cap THC potency in statute and ban vapes and flavored inhalable products, the delivery system that ties nicotine to marijuana.
- Reject "marijuana for opioid use disorder" as a qualifying condition or a treatment claim; it is not supported by the trials.
- Require annual state reporting on co-use, poison-center calls, and treatment admissions so the pattern is measured, not guessed.

All figures are drawn from the sources below. Where a study reports an association, this brief uses the language of association.

Sources

1 Early onset of cannabis use and risk for opioid use disorder across two decades in the United States. *Addictive Behaviors*, 2026. sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306460326001139

2 Volkow ND, Han B, Einstein EB, Compton WM. Prevalence of substance use disorders by time since first substance use among young people in the US. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 2021. jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics

3 NIH Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study. The teen drug triad has rotated. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence Reports*, 2026. doi.org/10.1016/j.dadr.2026.100463

4 The efficacy and safety of cannabinoids for the treatment of mental disorders and substance use disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis of 54 randomized trials. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 2026. sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2215036626000155

5 Analysis of 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health data on marijuana and psilocybin co-use. Reported in *The Drug Report*, May 28, 2026. thedrugreport.org

6 Co-use of cannabis and tobacco and risk of psychosis. *Nature Mental Health*, 2026. Reported in *The Drug Report*, May 21, 2026. thedrugreport.org

7 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2025 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. samhsa.gov/data