

Colorado medical marijuana being diverted to teens, CU study finds

By John Ingold *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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Nearly three-quarters of teens in two metro-area substance-abuse treatment programs said they have used medical marijuana bought or grown for someone else, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Only one of the 122 teens in the study who admitted to using medical marijuana was an approved patient. The findings hint that the leaking of medical marijuana from the legal state system to illegal users may be common in Colorado.

"The results from this study suggest that medical marijuana diversion is a serious concern," the authors conclude in their report, published last month in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

The study looked at 164 teens ages 14 to 18 who were in one of two treatment programs in the metro area. Most of those teens were in the programs after being sent there by social services or the juvenile-justice system, though some had self-admitted to the programs. All of the teens admitted to using marijuana at least once in their lives.

In surveys conducted of the teens, researchers asked whether the teens had ever used somebody else's medical marijuana and, if so, how often. Seventy-four percent of the teens said they had, with a median frequency of 50 times.

The researchers said the teens who did report having used another's medical marijuana were more likely to have started regular marijuana use earlier, to use marijuana more frequently and to have more symptoms of marijuana dependency than other marijuana users in the study.

Stacy Salomonsen-Sautel, the study's lead author, said more research is needed to figure out why. Did medical marijuana use worsen the teens' substance use? Or is it the other way around?

"It could be that the kids who had more abuse and dependence symptoms were looking for more marijuana and came across medical marijuana," she said.

The study also can't say where the medical marijuana came from — patients, growers or dispensaries — or whether it actually was legal medical marijuana, since its status was reported only by the teens.

But Salomonsen-Sautel said the study raises questions about how airtight Colorado's medical-marijuana system is.

"The current system is not adequately guarding against diversion to adolescents," she said.

It is illegal for licensed patients or legal marijuana providers to divert marijuana into the illicit market — or even provide it to unlicensed friends. Mark Salley, spokesman for the Colorado health department, which maintains the medical-marijuana patient registry, said people caught diverting marijuana can face criminal charges and have their patient cards revoked.

The new study adds an extra flavor to an already-complex stew of research on medical marijuana and youths in Colorado.

Some studies have suggested that teen use of marijuana rose and perceptions of harm dropped at the beginning of the state's medical-marijuana boom.

But that is contradicted by a recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that found use by Colorado high-schoolers dropped in 2011 compared with 2009 and is below the national average. About 22 percent of Colorado high school students reported using marijuana during the previous 30 days in 2011, nearly 3 percentage points lower than in 2009.

The same study found that about 17 percent of Colorado high school students reported in 2011 being offered, sold or given illegal drugs at school — a 5-percentage-point decrease from 2009.

"I really think, at the end of the day, teen marijuana use is a serious issue, but Colorado is on the right path and the numbers are going down," said Brian Vicente of the marijuana- reform advocacy group Sensible Colorado.

Mike Elliott, the executive director of the Medical Marijuana Industry Group, said the regulation of Colorado's medical-marijuana businesses has worked to deny teens access to marijuana.

"These statistics demonstrate that Colorado's medical- marijuana regulatory framework is giving the state, localities and school districts the tools they need to keep marijuana out of our schools," Elliott said.

But, earlier this month, a group of drug investigators released a report documenting more than 70 instances of purportedly legal medical marijuana being diverted into the black market.

Tom Gorman, the director of that group, the Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, said the new study seems to confirm his group's finding.

"It doesn't surprise me," he said.

John Ingold: 303-954-1068, jingold@denverpost.com or twitter.com/john_ingold