



## Legal Marijuana – The Hidden Risk to Sparta’s Families

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SPARTA, NJ - Adult recreational marijuana use or RMU was approved by New Jersey voters in November.

How may the presence of legal RMU in New Jersey impact the health of families in Sparta Township?

Local leaders voiced their concern, in part, that legal RMU may increase the frequency of adolescent use and the risk of overdosing by children. Educational and other efforts to protect children seem to have prevented those concerns from materializing in states with legal RMU.

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However, increased parental use of marijuana after legalization presents considerable risks to families, children in particular.

### Legalizing RMU increases adult use and that poses a risk to Sparta’s families

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention or CDC [says](#) that legal RMU leads to increased adult use. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or HHS [reported](#) a similar conclusion.

In a 2019 study researchers from New York University quantified the risk, [reporting](#) that among adults aged 26 or older, past-month frequent use was 23 percent higher in legal RMU states compared to states where RMU remains illegal.

A recent survey of Sparta adults, the "[Sparta RMU Study](#)" produced similar findings, wherein 43 of the 222 respondents, or 19%, said that they would increase RMU after legalization.

Category	Number	Percent
Total Respondents	221	100%
Current Marijuana Users	43	19%
Current Marijuana Users – Increase Use	9	4%
Currently Not Using Marijuana	178	81%
Currently Not Using Marijuana – Will Use	34	15%
Total Increased Use	43	19%

### Sparta RMU Study.

Applying the Sparta RMU Survey results to [U.S. Census data](#), and assuming that 65% of Sparta residents over 18 have children, suggests that over 2,200 parents in Sparta would increase marijuana use now that it is legal.

There is relatively consistent and well accepted data showing that increased parental RMU can result in significant damage to the respective families.

“I know of many children whose moms have been through hell because of grown men who use marijuana,” Erin Durkin, 38, said. “Now with legalization those men will be able to say ‘f\*ck you guys, it’s legal.’”

Durkin’s observations are supported by studies regarding parental use of marijuana.

A [report](#) out of the University of California, Los Angeles or UCLA found that parents who reported using marijuana engaged in the physical abuse of children three times more frequently than those who did not. Unfortunately, the violence is not limited to children. Researchers at the University of Tennessee [reported](#) that increased adult RMU leads to a significant increase in intimate partner psychological, physical and sexual violence by men.

Children of marijuana consumers often suffer from psychiatric disorders, including depression, loneliness, confusion, fear, shame, anger and anxiety, the NIH [reported](#).

In addition to direct physical and mental harm, the children of chronic adult users were up to 4.4 times more likely to use marijuana themselves, according to the [NIH](#).

This viscous cycle of parent abuse being passed on to children is similar to that of alcohol abuse by parents, a vice targeted by the [Sparta Municipal Alliance](#) a local committee that is grant funded through a state initiative established to fight drug and alcohol abuse.



**Sparta Municipal Alliance poster alerting parents about alcohol use; a similar issue exists with adult RMU.**

It is important to note that occasional use by parents did not lead to increased adolescent use, according to the NIH report. So for the parents who may increase consumption when legal products are available, the question of how that may impact their families may depend on how often they use.

**Kids use marijuana and it is bad for them, but legalizing RMU does not statistically increase adolescent use**

A 2019 study by HHS found that approximately [7%](#) of children between the ages of 12 and 17 have tried marijuana over the past 30 days. Direct marijuana use can lead to significant physical and mental health issues for adolescents, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or [CDC](#) and the National Institutes for Health or [NIH](#).

Given these well accepted facts, there is a [concern on the part of Sparta’s public officials](#) that adolescent use could increase with legal RMU.

On the demand side, legalizing RMU sends the wrong message to children about the health aspects of RMU, lowering their resistance to experimentation and use. The supply of legal marijuana products in the state increases the risk of access by adolescents, particularly to high-potency products like gummies and other edibles, the officials said.

Despite this concern, a recent nationwide [study](#) conducted by HHS reported that between 2016 and 2019 there was no meaningful increase in regular marijuana use by those between 12 and 17 years of age.

During that same period California, Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada and Vermont all passed legal RMU legislation, joining predecessors Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Washington D.C. and Oregon.

A comprehensive [study](#) reported in JAMA Pediatrics actually found a decrease in teen use in states that legalized RMU. The authors of this 2019 paper suggested that “it is more difficult for teenagers to obtain marijuana as drug dealers are replaced by licensed dispensaries that require proof of age.”

**Legalizing RMU has not been shown to increase overdosing**

According to the [CDC](#), overuse of marijuana can lead to extreme confusion, paranoia, panic, fast heart rate, delusions or hallucinations, increased blood pressure, and severe nausea or vomiting.

It is also true that newer forms of marijuana products, including edibles and resins, [have significantly higher potency](#) than the marijuana many adults first smoked in the 70s and 80s. Increased potency can lead to more overdoses.



**Different forms of marijuana, including edibles that appear like candy. Source: Shutterstock.**

Ashley Brown, from The Center for Prevention & Counseling, hosted a recent [webinar](#) on the impact of legal RMU on Sussex County residents. Brown reported that the county was third in the state for marijuana-related emergency visits by people between 10 and 17 years old.

Given these factors, public officials like Brown are justified in being concerned about the impact of legal RMU on adolescent overdosing. However, to date there is no meaningful evidence linking the legalization of RMU to overdoses by adolescents.

More broadly, [no overdose death has been reported](#) for any age group in the United States that has been directly attributable to marijuana use, despite significantly enhanced potency of available products.

**How do you protect your children?**

The fact that legal RMU has not led to a significant increase in the use or abuse by adolescents may depend in part on educational efforts directed at children.

That education comes from public organizations and, in some cases, parents.

During the [webinar](#) hosted by Brown, [Ed Blevins](#), a substance abuse counselor at First Light Counseling in Sparta, provided [advice](#) for parents when talking to their children about marijuana use.

Above all else parents need to convey an absolute and firm “no use” policy for their children, all the way through [college](#).

Second, if children still use, please seek out counseling. Blevins points out that children use drugs for a reason and parents need to find out that reason before addressing it.

Blevins is also a proponent of increased physical activity, which children need to work off anxiety and stress, two causes of marijuana use.

Finally, Blevins said that if children use, parents have to let them suffer the negative consequences, whether imposed by a school or the police. Only then will the children learn how to deal with the issue and work through it.

[Lisa Frisbie](#), a colleague of Blevin’s, provided three main messages for parents during the webinar.

Frisbie stressed that prevention must be intentional - parents need to be proactive in terms of when and how they communicate to their children.

Intervention must also be clear and consistent, Frisbie said. Parents should not send mixed messages or change messages over time.

Finally, in case of adolescent marijuana use, parents must be committed to the child, not the issue. Frisbie reported that many parents get so wrapped up in the use itself, instead of looking through the cause and how to address those causes.

“I think the issues and parental approach will now be within the same scope as alcohol with children,” Frisbie said in a subsequent email exchange.

Like alcohol, with the legalization of RMU parents must distinguish between adult use, when brains are largely formed and adolescent use, when brains are still developing, Frisbie added.

Frisbie’s advice is consistent with the evolution of RMU education for children across the country, where the messaging has evolved from [do not use marijuana, to delayed use](#).

Additional advice for parents has been [put together](#) by the HHS. More locally, The Center for Prevention & Counseling has created a Marijuana Prevention Resource [Page](#) that provides a number of tools for county residents in need of assistance.

### **Is the Sparta Board of Education going to change the curriculum to deal with the new law?**

Kim Bragg, President of the Sparta Board of Education, said at a November 19 board meeting that the current curriculum already includes components that are directed at educating the town’s youth as the hazards of drug and alcohol use.

According to an email exchange with Interim Superintendent Patrick McQueeny, he and his team planned to revisit the issue after RMU legislation was finalized.

### **Why do “experts” seem to disagree on the types or magnitude of risks presented by legal RMU?**

Most studies are relatively consistent in finding that marijuana use by children is harmful, but that legalizing RMU does not materially increase the frequency of that use or the risk of overdosing.

The studies are equally consistent in finding that legalizing adult RMU leads to greater adult use and that adult use can cause significant issues at home.

However, the impact of legalizing RMU on other issues, including frequency of adolescent use and overdosing, crime and traffic accidents, is less clear. Why is that?

One of the major issues in this field of study is that marijuana use is often combined with the use of other substances, including alcohol or opioids. As such, determining the specific impact of marijuana consumption alone, never mind legal RMU, is extremely difficult and often leads to conflicting results from study to study.

Is the patient unconscious because of the marijuana or alcohol she ingested? Did he rob a store to fuel his heroin or marijuana addiction? Did the driver crash because he was using marijuana or because he also has opioids in his system?

This critical point was the conclusion of a 2019 [study](#) that evaluated the data from 47 different reports on the impact of legalizing RMU. The authors, including those from the Albert Einstein School of Medicine in New York, found that most of the reports “proved to be marred with inconsistencies” and that “many stated claims did not pass a methodical evaluation.”

In short, be careful what you read.

### **What’s next?**

If New Jersey is similar to other states that have legalized RMU, it could be more than a year before legal RMU products are available to Sparta’s adults.

That gives parents plenty of time to contemplate how they will communicate with their children about the risks of adolescent use.

It also provides time to consider how their own RMU may impact their families.

***This article does not constitute legal, medical or health advice, nor does it make any claim about the impact of marijuana use on individuals and families. It simply intends to inform the public regarding data published***

***by independent experts on the impacts of legalizing RMU.***

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