

CDPH Cannabis Education and Youth Prevention

Formative Research Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Rescue Agency (Rescue) conducted formative research with tweens, teens, young adults, and parents/guardians between June and December 2021 on behalf of the California Department of Public Health's (CDPH) Substance and Addiction Prevention Branch (SAPB) to inform the development and implementation of a statewide cannabis education and youth prevention media and social marketing campaign. The objectives of this research were as follows:

1. Explore knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding cannabis use.
2. Explore which social norms, values, social activities, and/or environments are more likely to encourage or discourage cannabis use.
3. Identify factual statements that motivate tweens, teens, and young adults to prevent, delay, or reduce cannabis use.
4. Assess receptivity to campaign ads (creative concepts) to identify preferences in ad style, tone, and framing.
5. Explore parent/guardian engagement with youth regarding cannabis use and risk.

The information provided by participants will assist in the development of educational campaign materials and public health messaging approaches to prevent, delay, and reduce youth cannabis use among the target audiences in the state of California. The research was conducted among four audience segments through virtual interviews and focus group discussions (using a video conferencing platform):

1. Tweens: Ages 11–14 (N=28)
2. Teens: Ages 15–20 (N=27)
3. Young Adults: Ages 21–25 (N=25)
4. Parents/Guardians: Ages 30–55 (N=24) *(Includes Spanish speakers)*

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with participants who reside in four geographically diverse locations throughout California: Northern California, Greater Sacramento/Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley, and Southern California. Demographic data (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity) were collected from each participant, along with other quantitative and qualitative data. Key findings from the formative research conducted are summarized below by audience.

Key Observations: Tween Audience (11-14 years)

- **Mental Health:** Some participants expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates challenges like daily routines, feelings of isolation, and the impacts of social media.
- **Developing an Identity:** Participants conveyed the importance they feel in developing a sense of self by describing their rooms as their “sanctuary” and a place they can be themselves. Participants were also receptive to statements and messaging around the change in brain structure, as they interpreted this as cannabis potentially impacting their personality.
- **Influence of Family:** Family was seen as an extremely important part of

participants' lives. Many participants reported having at least one supportive parent whom they felt comfortable talking to about important things in their lives, such as conversations about cannabis, with many participants sharing that they've had conversations about cannabis with their parents.

- **Perception of Risk (EXP¹ vs. SNT²):** Experimenter (EXP) tweens expressed fewer negative perceptions of cannabis and felt that cannabis did not adversely impact their lives, while susceptible non-triers (SNTs) tended to express that cannabis was “bad” and should not be used.
- **Primary Reasons for Use:** Tweens reported that the primary reason for use was to experiment, followed by “because it’s something their friends do.” Social norms are seen as a driver for this rationale, as this is around the time tweens begin to be more influenced by their peers. Age of cannabis initiation among tweens was typically 13–14 years old, with the first-time experience typically being with older family members (e.g., cousins, siblings) or with friends.
- **Brain Development:** Tweens shared that they are concerned about potential changes to their brain as those changes could alter the person they are (i.e., their personality). They cited this as the main motivating factor for never trying or quitting cannabis use.
- **Credible Sources:** Most tweens reported wanting to see someone who they can relate to as the source of information, such as a peer or someone slightly older, as they would be relatable and motivational.
- **Messaging:** Tweens expressed a desire to hear in-depth information that provided proof points around why cannabis impacts the brain and causes difficulties, like with memory development. They expressed wanting more specific and scientific information.

Key Observations: Teen Audience (15-20 years)

- **Mental Health:** Teens expressed that they care about their mental health and openly shared about their challenges like anxiety. They were less receptive to the statement noting that cannabis could cause anxiety and depression (“Marijuana can change parts of the brain that put the user at increased risk for depression and anxiety.”), as it is contradictory to their lived experience of cannabis helping with anxiety and depression.
- **COVID-19 Impact:** The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted teens. They felt that they had lost out on opportunities and milestones that they should have experienced as part of high school and/or college. Some teens also expressed that their cannabis use had increased during the pandemic.
- **Role of Friends and Family:** Teens reported that friends are their main support network. Most participants also noted they would turn to a sibling or cousin, rather than their parents, if they needed advice.
- **Perception of Risk:** Teens acknowledged that cannabis use comes with some risk. Participants believed any use at a young age (11–14 years) and daily use at any

¹ Experimenter: Participants who reported having tried cannabis.

² Susceptible Non-Trier: Participants who reported having never tried cannabis but reported being open or susceptible to trying, based on their responses to the susceptibility scale questions (i.e., Do you plan to use soon or use in next year? Are you curious about using? Would you use if a friend offered?) on the screener.

age is harmful; however, the perception of risk decreased for use at older ages (18–20). They also recognized that there are physical and mental risks to using cannabis, especially when they need to focus and be productive.

- **Primary Reasons for Use:** Teens identified coping and escapism as common reasons for cannabis use. They also described using cannabis to enhance activities and to connect with friends. Many 15- to 17-year-olds are at risk of beginning to transition from using socially to using to cope. Teens ages 18–20 are likely at higher risk for becoming consistent users.
- **Messaging Receptivity (EXP vs. SNT):** EXPs reported that they are not concerned with the long-term implications of cannabis use as they are more focused on immediate outcomes. Younger teens (15–17 years old) reported thinking/caring more about short-term outcomes (e.g., going to the football game that weekend, the school dance), while older teen EXPs (18–20 years old) reported caring more about longer-term outcomes (e.g., getting into college, buying a car, starting a job). SNTs (most commonly 15- to 17-year-olds) were more receptive to messaging about risk. Both EXP and SNT segments were receptive to scientific information on cannabis' damage on brain development.
- **Credible Sources:** Teens expressed a desire to hear in-depth scientific information from a credible and trustworthy source. They identified peers or slightly older individuals with personal experience with cannabis as trustworthy sources.
- **Messaging:** Older teens (18–20 years old) expressed a desire to hear non-judgmental information. Many participants were turned off by the ads perceived to be talking down on those who use cannabis.

Key Observations: Young Adult Audience (21-25 years)

- **Mental Health:** While young adults reported that cannabis is primarily used to help manage mental health, they also recognize that at a certain point cannabis can impact one's mental health and/or become a dependency. They added that this was dependent on the individual.
- **COVID-19 Impact:** While young adults shared that the pandemic negatively impacted nearly every aspect of their lives, some added that it was an opportunity to self-reflect on what they care about and want to do. This reflection positively impacted certain parts of their lives like finances and health habits.
- **Stage in Life:** Young adults noted that they value independence and not having to rely on others for financial stability. More than half of the participants selected personal progress as the most important thing in their lives.
- **Perception of Risk:** Young adults acknowledge that cannabis use comes with some risk. They were able to provide societal or situational harms (e.g., using cannabis during pregnancy, driving within one hour of using cannabis) from cannabis use more easily than risk of physical or mental harm, since cannabis is largely seen as healthy among this age group.
- **Primary Reasons for Use:** Young adults' main reason for use was to relax or calm nerves. They described their cannabis use in terms of cannabis being a tool to manage mental health challenges and to enhance moments in their lives like being social.
- **Credible Sources:** Young adults expressed a desire to hear in-depth scientific

information from a credible and trustworthy source such as teachers, doctors, or subject matter experts.

- **Messaging:** Young adults expressed a desire to hear nonjudgmental information; many were turned off by the ads perceived to be talking down to those who use cannabis.

Key Observations: Parents/Guardians (30-55 years)

- **COVID-19 Impact:** Parents/guardians reported being significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, though not everyone was negatively affected. For some parents/guardians, the pandemic period brought about better job opportunities and offered more time with their children than they would have had in ordinary circumstances. For most parents/guardians, however, the pandemic was challenging in its duration, which added an extra layer of isolation and obstacles.
- **Parenting Style:** Parenting styles influenced conversations with tween and teen children. Parents/guardians with a more authoritarian approach reported having conversations with their tween and teen children about cannabis but were uncertain about the effectiveness. Parents/guardians with an open and honest relationship with their tween and teen children reported less urgency to have conversations about cannabis, as they felt it was not an urgent issue.
- **Parent/Guardian Usage:** Parents/guardians who reported using cannabis within the past 12 months expressed a more relaxed approach (e.g., lack of urgency) to talking about cannabis and cannabis risk with their tween and teen children, in contrast to those participants who are not current cannabis users. Parents/guardians who were current cannabis users also perceived cannabis to be healthy and beneficial for adults.
- **Advice:** Parents/guardians reported that they want to have important conversations about cannabis use with their tween and teen children. However, only tweens report being more likely to turn to their parents for advice and to have important discussions with them, while teens are more likely to turn to siblings or cousins.
- **Cannabis Conversations:** Parents/guardians, in general, lacked guidance on how to have effective conversations with their tween and teen children about cannabis. This was especially evident with teens as they were not aware that the conversations should be ongoing and not a one-time occurrence.
- **Age:** Parents/guardians' views of cannabis risk changed with the age of their children. For the tween age group (11–14 years old), parents/guardians were very concerned if there was any use. For teens ages 15 and older, risk perception decreased as age increased, with parents/guardians believing that experimentation among the older teen age group (18–20 years) was “no big deal.”
- **Daily Use:** Parents/guardians universally felt that daily use of cannabis was high risk. Generally, they would prefer that their tween and teen children not use cannabis; however, they were less concerned about their teenage children using cannabis if use was non-daily.
- **Influence:** Parents/guardians expressed wariness over their own level of influence on their tween and teen child's cannabis use behavior—this was accentuated

for authoritarian parents/guardians.

- **Misinformation:** Parents/guardians appreciated ads that provided clear guidelines on how they can help their tween and teen child navigate misinformation around cannabis.
- **Messaging:** Parents/guardians were most motivated by facts that show the impact of cannabis on brain development, how cannabis can affect their tween and teen child's behavior, and the link to cannabis use and mental health challenges.