

2021



San Diego County Marijuana Prevention Initiative Report

Table of Contents

1	Introduction, Overview & Current Environment
2–6	Data Indicators and Trends
7–8	Local Collaboration & Prevention Efforts
9	Emerging Trends
11	References

Introduction

California voters passed Proposition 64, The Adult Use of Marijuana Act, on November 4, 2016, legalizing the adult use and possession of marijuana. Retail sales of marijuana products began in 2018. The San Diego County Marijuana Prevention Initiative (MPI) published an initial report in early 2016 and a subsequent report in 2020. Previous reports included local marijuana-related trends to assess baseline data and identify important public health issues. This new report presents trends and public health data related to youth marijuana use and documents changes observed following legalization.

Overview of the MPI

The County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services (BHS), has funded the current MPI since 2012 to reduce youth access to and use of marijuana. The MPI engages in science-based educational outreach in collaboration with the County's Regional Prevention Providers to inform the community of the harmful effects marijuana can have in our youth populations. The MPI's regional prevention strategies focus on educating and informing the public about the harms associated with adolescent marijuana use. MPI staff continues to engage the community and share resources through workshops, trainings, and media advocacy.

The MPI regularly collects local-level data to inform prevention practices and identify any emerging trends within the local landscape. These data are then shared with prevention providers, law enforcement partners, parents, educators, and youth. Data are routinely collected from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), San Diego County Community Survey, SANDAG, San Diego County drug treatment admissions, medical examiner, and other local sources. Additionally, the MPI reviews and compiles data from both the state and national level to identify trends and track changes in youth marijuana use over time.

Current Environment

COVID-19 and the lockdown have changed the environment around marijuana access. On March 17, 2020 California declared marijuana an essential business early in the pandemic which, coupled with isolation and anxiety, created a financial windfall for the marijuana industry. At the same time, schools and other youth activities were cancelled or limited, leaving a tremendous gap in supervision and support for families of all ages.

Current Environment (cont.)

The MPI worked to reorganize and respond immediately to unprecedented environmental changes, while maintaining focused strategies to reduce youth access and use of marijuana. Below are key examples of how the MPI quickly pivoted to operate in a virtual environment:

- Conducted meetings, media events and workshops through virtual platforms, expanding participation and attendance at many meetings.
- Continued to provide technical assistance to our prevention partners virtually.
- Engaged in media advocacy efforts to challenge the decision to declare marijuana businesses as essential businesses during a respiratory pandemic. Several opinion articles were submitted and published in the Times of San Diego to educate and inform the community on potential dangers.
- Disseminated key information and updates to the MPI mailing list to ensure community partners and agencies were kept up-to-date with public health information.

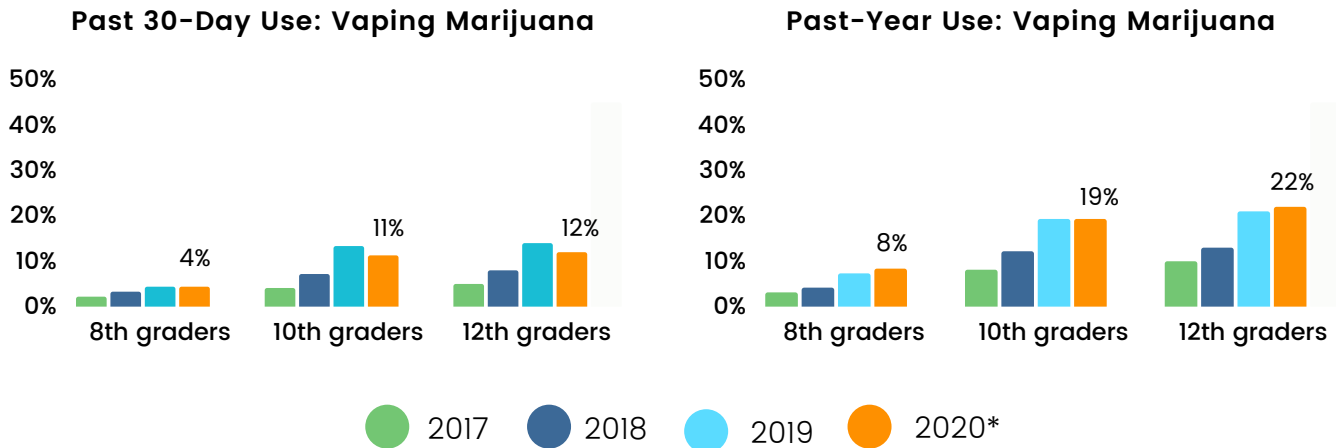
Key Data Indicators

Given the importance of monitoring key indicators relative to the current and emerging marijuana landscapes countywide, it is critical to be aware of and monitor current data and trends pertaining to marijuana use, access, and use. The following pages highlight datapoints from extant data sources, useful for informing current needs and continued prevention strategies.

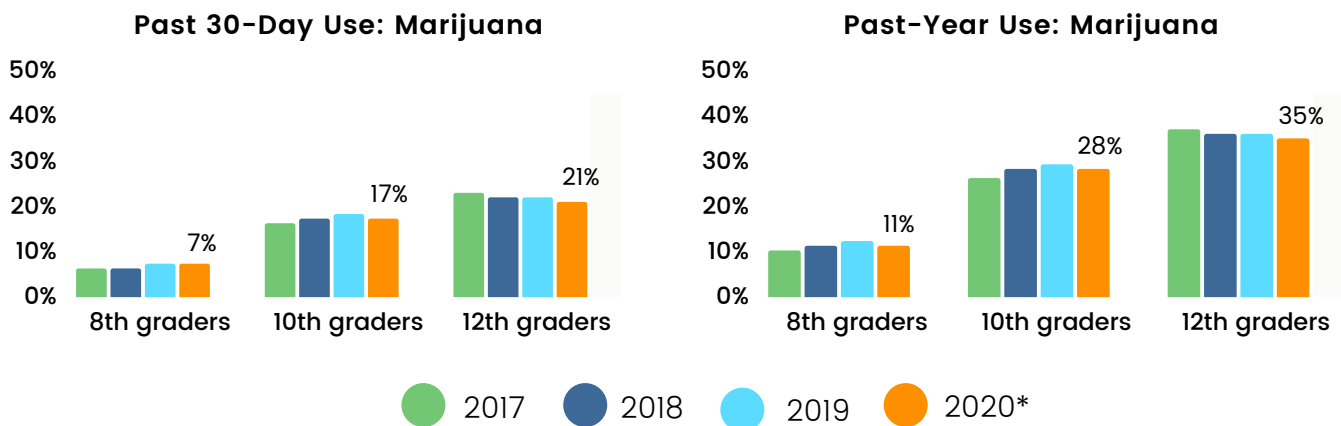
Monitoring the Future (MTF) Survey¹

MTF is an ongoing national study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of U.S. secondary school students, college students, and young adults on drug and alcohol use and related attitudes.

Past-Month and Past-Year Marijuana Vaping



Past-Month and Past-Year Marijuana Use



*Note: Data collection stopped prematurely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Completed surveys represent about 25% of the size of a typical year's data collection. However, results were gathered from a broad geographic range and were statistically weighted to be nationally representative.

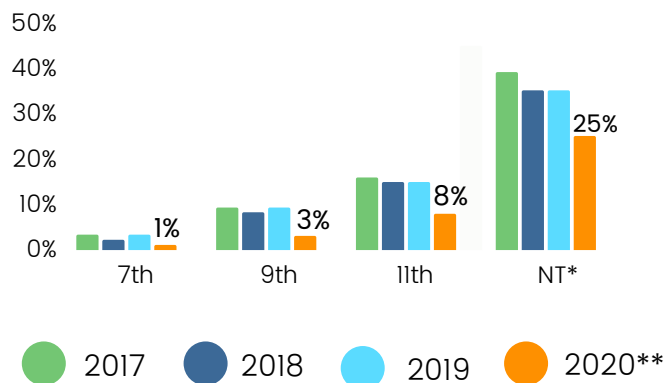
The use of marijuana (in all forms, including smoking and vaping) did not significantly change in any of the three grades for lifetime use, past 12-month use, past 30-day use, and daily use from 2019–2020.

California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)²

The CHKS is administered in most San Diego County school districts. It surveys middle and high school youth attending both traditional/mainstream and nontraditional/alternative schools (e.g., continuation schools).

Marijuana Use Across Grade Levels

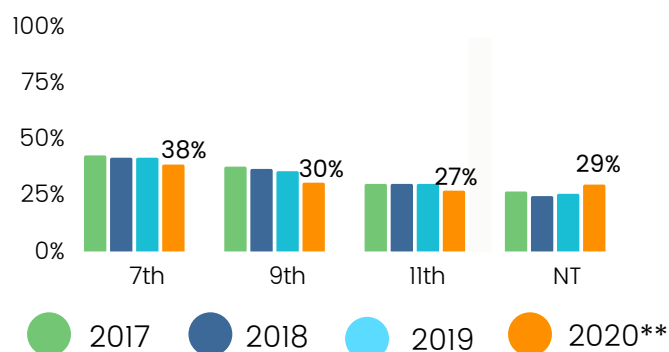
Past 30-Day Use of Marijuana



One in ten (10%) students attending non-traditional schools reported **daily marijuana use in 2020**

Perception of Harm & Ease of Access

Perception of Harm: Students Reporting 'Great' Harm from Occasional Marijuana Use



Students Reporting That Marijuana is Very Easy or Fairly Easy to Obtain[^]

12% of 7th graders

35% of 9th graders

53% of 11th graders

49% of NT* students

[^]2020 -21 data

*Students attending non-traditional schools

**When considering 2020-21 CHKS data, please note that survey methodologies were revised to allow for online or hybrid data collection due to COVID-19. These changes, coupled with lower response rates and impacts of COVID-19, may affect the data presented and limit comparability of findings to previous years.

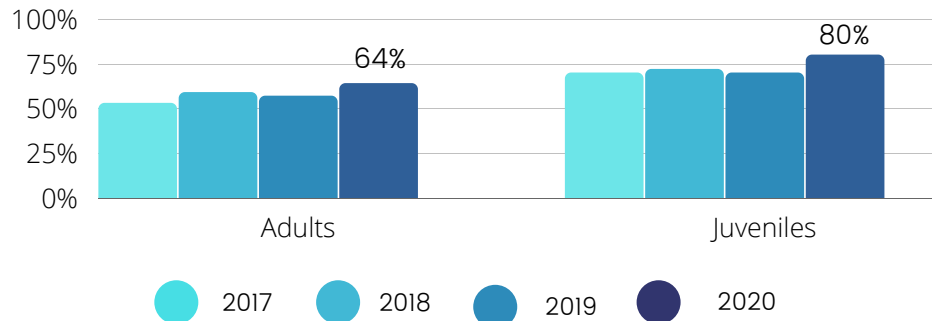
SANDAG Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) Survey³

The purpose of the SAM survey is to identify drug use trends among the adult and juvenile offender populations to develop appropriate strategies for the prevention of drug misuse. Biannually, SANDAG staff conduct interviews with a sample of adults and juveniles arrested and booked into the San Diego County detention facilities.

8 in 10 youth
say they have
ever dabbled
THC



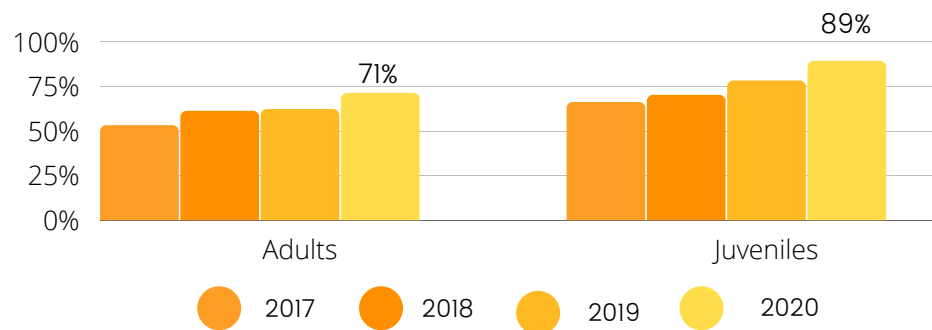
Ever Dabbled THC



Almost 9 in 10
youth say they
have ever
vaped THC



Ever Vaped THC



Ease of Access

100%

report marijuana
is easy to obtain

Marijuana Remains Drug of Choice

56%

positive for
marijuana at time of
interview

Low Perception of Harm

1 in 5 (20%)

youth feel marijuana
would be harmful to
users

San Diego County Community Survey⁴

The San Diego County Community Survey was developed to systematically collect and assess alcohol- and other drug-related (AOD) perceptions and opinions. The findings from the Community Surveys have allowed the Prevention System to monitor trends and track changes in community perceptions and opinions over time and to identify emerging issues of concern. Below are key findings from the 2021 administration of the Community Survey. To view more in-depth findings please [click here](#).

Perception of Harm

Underage Marijuana Use

About 7 in 10 (67%)

respondents believe marijuana use **under 21** is harmful to health.



Frequent Marijuana Use

About 6 in 10 (64%)

respondents believe using marijuana **everyday or every week** at any age is harmful to health.



Edible Marijuana Food Products

About 5 in 10 (47%)

respondents believe using **edible marijuana food products** at any age is harmful to health.



Policy Support

Marijuana Drug Interaction Warning

77%

support a law that requires pharmacies to label medications that have drug interactions with marijuana products.

Ban Marijuana Sales to Those Under 21

57%

support a law that would prohibit any type of marijuana product, medicinal or recreational, to those under age 21.

Marijuana Outlet Regulations

56%

support a local law regulating marijuana businesses.

Adolescent Marijuana-Related Treatment Admissions⁵

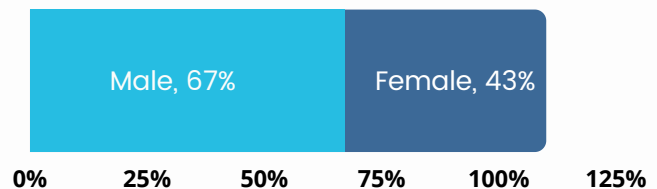
Marijuana Remains Drug of Choice for Adolescents Entering Treatment

About 8 in 10 (82%)

adolescents (<17) entering a San Diego County Funded Treatment Facility reported marijuana as their primary drug of choice in FY 19-20.

n=1,238

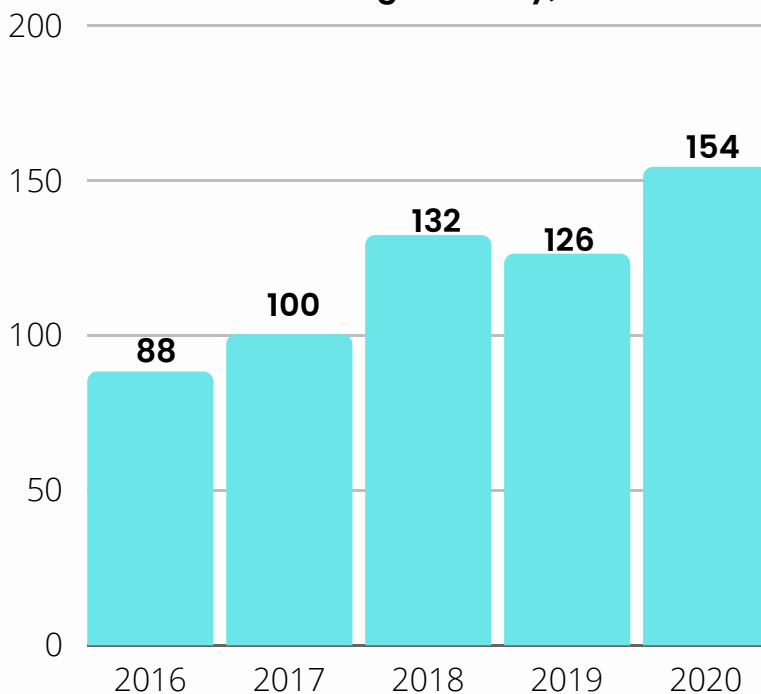
Primary Marijuana Treatment Admissions for Adolescents, by Gender



San Diego County Poison Control Data⁶

The below graph displays the number of unduplicated cases handled by the California Poison Control Center for calls related to marijuana exposure from persons living in San Diego County. Each year displayed includes all persons of any age and dispositions/outcomes for the cases, including cases “resolved on-site” (i.e., from the location of the call), “treated/released from health care facility,” and “admitted to health care facility.”

Number of Marijuana Human Exposure Cases for San Diego County, 2016-2020

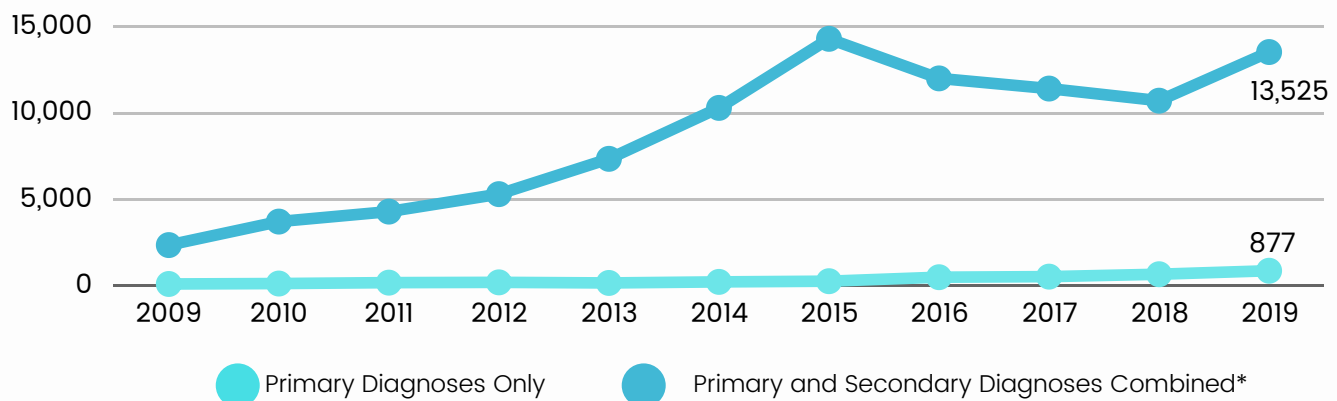


75% increase

in marijuana exposure cases in San Diego County handled by the California Poison Control Center **since 2016.**

Marijuana-Related Emergency Department Discharges⁷

Number of Emergency Department (ED) Discharges for Marijuana-Related Diagnoses in San Diego County, 2009–2019



690% increase

in ED discharges with marijuana listed as a **primary diagnosis**, from 111 in 2009 to 877 in 2019.



473% increase

in ED discharges with **marijuana as a primary or secondary diagnosis combined**, from 2,362 in 2009 to 13,525 in 2019.

*Indicates cases where either the primary or secondary diagnosis upon discharge was marijuana-related. For most secondary cases, individuals came into the ER for something else (e.g., broken arm, injury, flu, etc.) and cannabis use was added as a secondary diagnosis. In these cases, the drug use may or may not have contributed to the reason for the ER visit

THC Presence in Youth & Young Adult Suicides

A study conducted by researchers at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) found that marijuana use was associated with increased risks of thoughts of suicide (suicidal ideation), suicide plan, and suicide attempt among young adults ages 18–35 .

The results of the study indicated that even people who used cannabis nondaily (<300 days/year) were more likely to have suicidal ideation and to plan or attempt suicide than those who did not use the drug at all. These associations remained regardless of whether someone was also experiencing depression.⁸

In San Diego County

39% of completed suicides under the age of 25 tested positive for THC in 2020.⁹

Local Collaboration and Prevention Efforts

Local prevention efforts continue to evolve as virtual advocacy and access to potent marijuana products become the norm. Despite recent local policy changes around marijuana storefront operations, prevention activities continue to focus on compliance, education, consumer protections and health.

Marijuana-Drug Interactions Education



MPI staff developed a drug interactions project along with 17 local pharmacies to raise awareness about dangerous drug interactions between over-the-counter, prescription medication, and THC/CBD. More than 10,000 resource cards were disseminated encouraging patients to visit [drugs.com](https://www.drugs.com) to check for harmful drug interactions. A survey was developed to identify gaps in consumer protections.

Assessing Marijuana Outlet Compliance

A marijuana storefront assessment tool was developed and made available by SAY San Diego, to monitor retail outlets and ensure compliance. It is undergoing final updates and will be ready for distribution Spring 2022.



Reducing Youth Access to Vaping Devices

Vaping has become an epidemic and schools are ground zero in efforts to educate and prevent youth from vaping. MPI staff, the San Diego County Office of Education along with regional prevention partners developed a vape disposal protocol for school staff. This will help ensure the safe disposal of these products which are considered hazardous waste.



Local Collaboration and Prevention Efforts



Public Health Experts Guide MPI Efforts

An important component of a public health first approach to environmental prevention is to recruit partners with extensive knowledge in the field of substance use prevention. CCR was proud to announce the addition of Roneet Lev, MD, FACEP, to the CCR team. Dr. Lev is former Chief Medical Officer at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and current Chief of the Emergency Department at Scripps Mercy Hospital in San Diego; she also hosts a popular podcast known as High Truths on Drugs and Addiction.

MPI Media Advocacy

MPI hosted a news event to introduce a new medical advocacy group that encourages a public health first approach to marijuana policy. IASIC, or the International Academy on the Science and Impact of Cannabis, is a group of doctors educating on marijuana harms. This non-partisan and non-political group is developed, organized, and guided by doctors in the hope that science guides policies that protect the public and create informed decision making. The IASIC resource library and advocacy tools are located [here](#).



Emerging Trends

Increasing DUI Fatalities

DUI-related fatality crashes are spiking across San Diego County at a record-setting pace with 2021 data indicating the most fatal DUIs in two decades. Local officials reported 37 people have died in DUI crashes in 2021, already surpassing last year's DUI deaths. In 2020, 33 people were killed, which was the worst such year in San Diego County going back more than two decades. Both drug legalization and polydrug use may be the leading cause of the increases. A drugged driving prevention campaign, with input from Regional Prevention Providers and Initiatives, will be created with a focus on polydrug use and availability of rideshare programs.

Local Control and Community Voices

Proposition 64 promised local communities the ability to decide how much marijuana access they will allow. However, we have seen attempts to limit public input on issues related to youth. Local community voices are critical in the process of deciding how much access to marijuana products they will allow. Moving forward, it is critical to empower communities and local groups to engage in the planning process and voice their concerns surrounding public health and youth impacts of expanding marijuana access.

Transition from Marijuana Storefronts to Virtual Sales

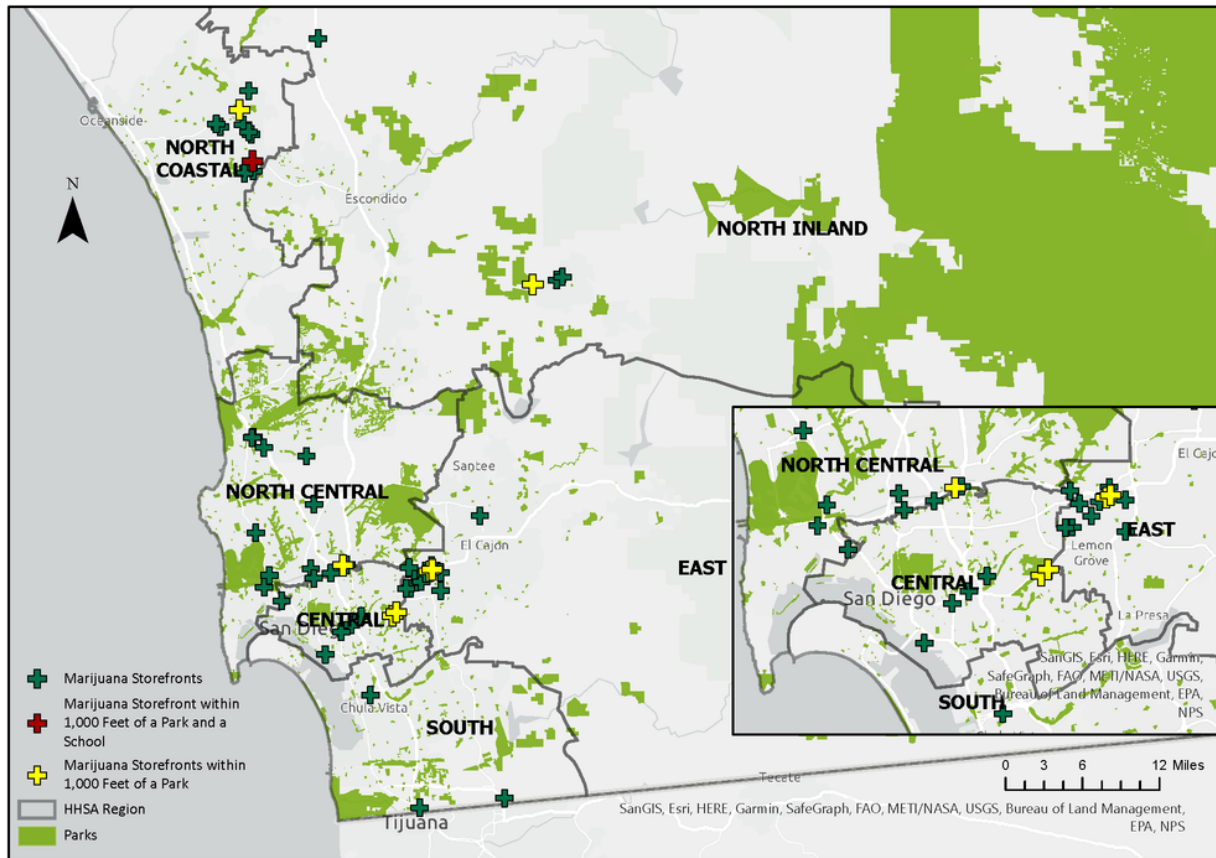
During the pandemic we saw many marijuana outlets increase online delivery services, further expanding their reach and access throughout the community. With this expanded availability there is an increasing need for standardized compliance protocols to hold these businesses accountable to the rules and regulations put forth by the California Department of Cannabis Control. This will be a challenge, especially with minor sales, advertising, and increasing virtual transactions.

Lack of Consumer Protections

In a study conducted by UCSD of 700 legal recreational cannabis dispensaries, 67.9% failed to comply with California laws requiring age-limit signage. Additionally, 35.3% of dispensaries had marketing items that appealed to children inside their stores.¹⁰ Synthetic THC, such as Delta-8-THC and THC-P, have been created and marketed with little information about side effects. This, combined with the availability of higher potency products leaves consumers at an increased risk of potential harm. Customers can purchase and consume (vape, eat or smoke) as much or as potent of an amount they desire with little to no restrictions. Many product labels lack the proper warnings about driving, drug interactions, mental health, and prenatal use. The industry must allow for accurate labeling of product ingredients, and child proof packaging with warnings that discuss potential harms.

Tracking Storefronts and Compliance

Licensed Marijuana Storefronts in San Diego County



Footnote: Data pulled on 8/6/2021 from the California Department of Cannabis Control. Data only include licensed marijuana outlets with storefront locations (Type 10 and Type 12 licenses). The map does not account for delivery services (Type 9 licenses) or unlicensed marijuana storefronts available throughout the County. Of the existing 51 marijuana storefronts with a known address, 16% are within 1,000 feet of a school and/or park. One storefront is within 1,000 feet of both a Park and a School.



Looking Ahead: Prevention Priorities

As marijuana access and availability increase, public health data measuring youth trends and community impacts need to remain a key factor in policy decisions. The prevention community must continue to develop tools that hold the industry accountable to the existing guidelines and develop new, innovative approaches to address issues of overconcentration of marijuana businesses, THC potency limits and compliance with existing protocols for delivery services that are meant to prevent and discourage underage consumption.

For more information about MPI please visit www.ccrconsulting.org/mppi.

References

1. NIDA. Monitoring the Future Survey: High School and Youth Trends. National Institute on Drug Abuse Website. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/monitoring-future>. Published 2020. Accessed November 18, 2021.
2. California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS). San Diego County, Main Reports: 2009–2020. San Francisco; 2020.
3. San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG). Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region. San Diego; 2020.
4. Center for Community Research. County of San Diego Community Survey Findings: 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019. & 2021 San Diego; 2021.
5. County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services. Alcohol and Drug Services Databooks: FYs 2009/10 – 2019/20. 2021. https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/hhsa/programs/bhs/technical_resource_library.html.
6. California Poison Control Center. Marijuana Human Exposure Calls. 2021.
7. County of San Diego Emergency Services. Emergency Department Discharges for Cannabis-Related Diagnoses in San Diego County, 2006 – 2020. 2021.
8. NIDA. 2021, June 22. Cannabis use may be associated with suicidality in young adults. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/news-releases/2021/06/cannabis-use-may-be-associated-with-suicidality-in-young-adults> on 2021, December 14.
9. County of San Diego Department of the Medical Examiner. (2020, January–December). 2020 Suicides, 25 and under, San Diego County [Dataset].
10. Shi Y, Pacula RL. Assessment of Recreational Cannabis Dispensaries' Compliance With Underage Access and Marketing Restrictions in California. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2021;175(11):1178–1180. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2508