

As marijuana laws change, more teens think drugs are safe

By [Pat Reavy](#) |Deseret News

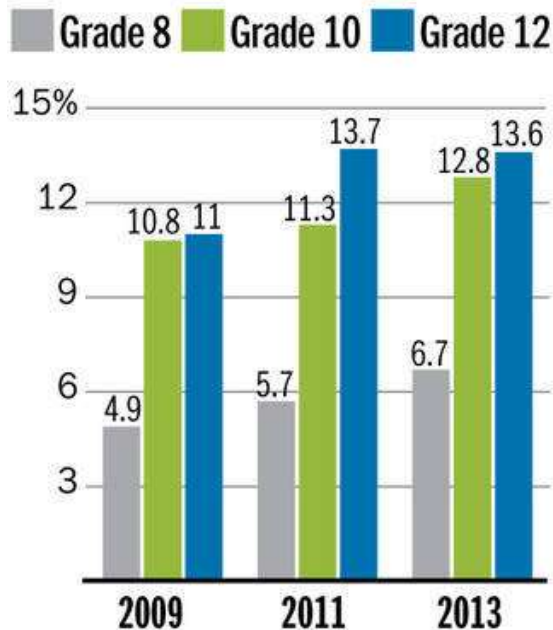
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New marijuana laws and cultural opinion changes are also affecting the attitudes of America's youth — something local addiction experts and police say is a dangerous trend.

Marijuana use by Salt Lake County youths

Survey of Utah students in grades 8, 10 and 12

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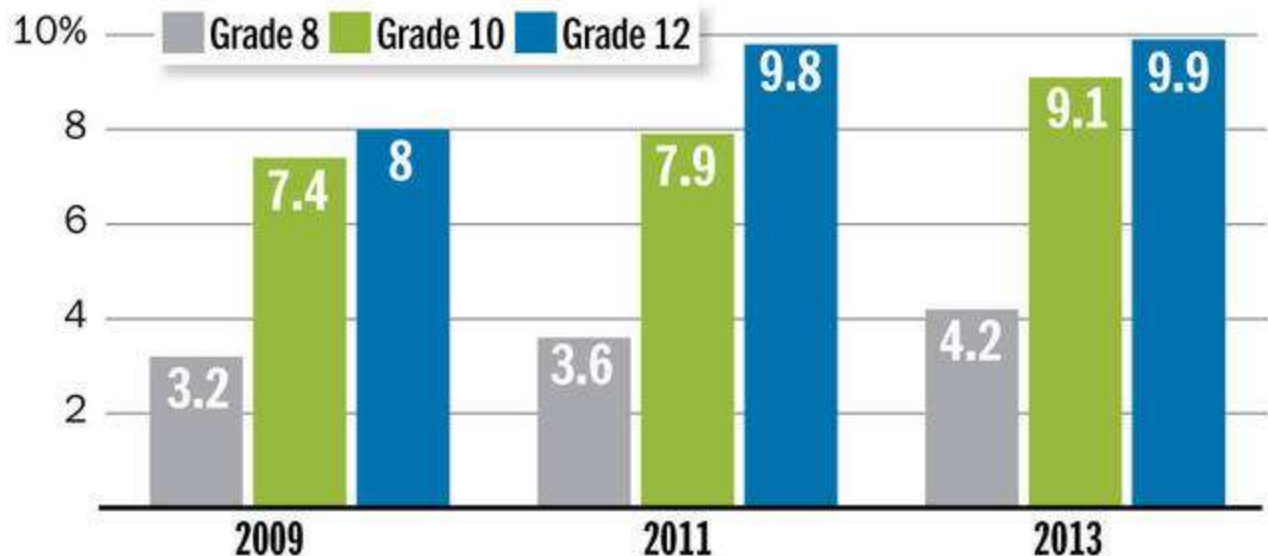
SOURCE: Utah Department of Human Services Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health

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"Where do you draw the line? If you're under 18 you can't use it? If you're over 18 it's OK? If you're a cop, if you're a pirate, if you're a doctor? How many hours before you begin work can you use it? I mean, if you're a cop, do you say, 'We think you can smoke a joint two hours before you come on shift and then decide whether or not you're going to shoot somebody?'" - Salt Lake Police Chief Chris Burbank

SALT LAKE CITY — New marijuana laws and cultural opinion changes are affecting the attitudes of America's youth — something local addiction experts and police say is a dangerous trend.

"Right now, what we're really seeing is marijuana and spice, it's just huge in the high schools," said Salt Lake police officer Doug Teerlink, who has 14 years of experience in the department and is currently assigned as a school resource officer.

"You talk to the kids and with everything that's going on with it being legalized in Colorado and comments being made that it's just not that bad for you, the kids are taking it one step further and they're telling me, 'It's just an herb. It's OK. In fact, it's used for medical purposes, it's not bad for you. It's good for you.'"

"And that's the belief that our kids are getting," he said.

That puts youth at risk at a time when they are still undergoing critical brain development.

Less disapproval

After a decade of declining marijuana use among juveniles, smoking pot has been on the rise since the mid-to-late 2000s, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse's Monitoring the Future Survey, which interviewed eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders about drug use.

"Young people are showing less disapproval of marijuana use and decreased perception that marijuana is dangerous," the Institute said. "The growing perception of marijuana as a safe drug may reflect recent public discussions over medical marijuana and movements to legalize the drug for adult recreational use in some states."

Colorado and Washington state recently legalized the recreational use of marijuana and 20 other states plus the District of Columbia now allow marijuana use for medical reasons.

The 2013 survey indicates that just 39.5 percent of high school seniors view regular marijuana use as harmful. That's down from 2012's rate of 44.1 percent, and considerably lower than rates from the past two decades.

The Monitoring the Future Survey found that 22.7 percent of 12th-graders had smoked marijuana at least once in the past month, up from 19.4 percent in 2008. The study also found that 6.5 percent of high school seniors used weed on a daily basis compared to 5 percent in the mid-2000s and 2.4 percent in 1993.

"Marijuana use in our high schools is always a pretty significant issue. It's the most frequently used drug among kids under 18 in Utah — even over alcohol," said Christina Zidow, chief operating officer of Odyssey House of Utah, a non-profit substance abuse treatment facility.

"It's incredibly easy to access marijuana in the school. Most of the kids in high school could find marijuana in a couple of hours if they wanted to."

While Zidow doesn't advocate marijuana use at any age, she said there's a big difference between adults smoking pot and minors.

"They're not legalizing it for kids anywhere," she said. "And even though in some places it's legal, it doesn't necessarily mean it's good for you or healthy for you."

Utah teens

Salt Lake Police Chief Chris Burbank, who regularly speaks throughout the city on crime, has seen the shift in attitudes. He said many of the high school students he's talked with don't distinguish between medical use of marijuana and recreational use.

"(They say) it's just legal, and so everyone can smoke it. And if everyone is legalizing it (and Utah isn't), it's just because we're a prudish state and so it must be OK," he said.