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An Illicit Phenomenon

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“An Illicit Phenomenon,” by Amanda Stables

Instructor’s Note

Students often struggle to separate the rhetorical act of informing from the rhetorical act of arguing. In this essay, Amanda Stables clearly understands her purpose and is able to inform her readers about the controversial topic of marijuana usage while refraining from stating her own position. Amanda’s essay is controlled by a well-placed and directive mission statement, which is mirrored by the organizational strategy for the body of her essay. What do you think about the quality of Amanda’s sources? How do you arrive at that assessment?

Writer’s Biography

Amanda Stables is a freshman Social Work major from Duluth, Georgia. She loves to dance, write, and talk to people about anything and everything.

An Illicit Phenomenon

As my friend explained how his perceptions of the world had begun to morph and change alarmingly, I wondered what exactly the substance he had purposefully inhaled was doing to his brain and body. I knew some of the basic effects, and at the time many people my age deemed them risks worth taking for an experience. But as I went on to college and declared a major in social work, I heard more and more of this “phenomenon” sweeping our nation. Teenagers and the steady rise of marijuana use is a hot topic in the field of social work today, as we try to answer some basic questions: Why do teenagers start abusing illegal substances like marijuana? What are the physical and mental effects of it? How do we cut through the myths swirling around the controversy? Why has underage use increased just as fast, if not faster, than the amount of preventive initiatives? This essay explores these questions about usage and effects of marijuana with regard

to teenagers, including possible consequences and current prevention techniques.

Marijuana is referred to by a plethora of terms, slang, and nicknames. Cannabis, weed, THC, Mary Jane, grass, ganja, bud, dope – the list goes on and on, with new lingo added almost daily. For the purposes of this essay, any part of the cannabis plant containing the psychoactive constituent abbreviated THC (which alters one's state of consciousness in any way) is referred to as marijuana. It is the most common illegal substance abused by teenagers in the United States today (Schweinsburg, Schweinsburg, Nagel, Eyler, & Tapert, 2011). Multitudinous studies have been done on the possible effects of the drug, and possible links to conditions ranging from liver disease to neuropsychological deficiencies have been researched (Ali, Amialchuk, & Dwyer, 2011). This essay also refers to marijuana use that is not legalized (often called 'medical marijuana'), unless explicitly indicated otherwise.

Studies indicate that marijuana abuse is beginning at younger and younger ages. When looking at specific generations and their rate of marijuana use, researchers found that generations, or, birth cohorts (people born around the same time), exhibiting stronger disapproval of the use of marijuana were significantly less likely to experiment with it, regardless of independent attitudes toward and perceptions of marijuana use (Keyes, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Johnston, Bachman, Li, & Hasin, 2011).

Illegal marijuana use rarely occurs in a vacuum. It is a strong predictor for many other issues, including alcohol abuse, behavioral issues, and other illicit drug use. A study from the University of Maryland demonstrated that there is a direct link between early marijuana use and behavioral issues in teens. (Falls, Wish, Garnier, Caldiera, O'Grady, Vincent, & Arria, 2011). Substance abuse either predicted or was a simultaneous factor with issues specifically listed in the DSM-IV (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as conduct problems, such as aggression, theft, and running away from home. Early conduct problems often precede marijuana

use (Falls, Wish, Garnier, Caldiera, O'Grady, Vincent, & Arria, 2011).

The possible effects of marijuana use have been debated, speculated, and researched for years. As use is beginning at younger and younger ages, more concerns have surfaced about the effects on developing minds and bodies. The effects on cognitive functioning are an especially concerning area of research in teens and young people. In an article published by Brown University, summarizing a study done by the Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society, scientists have found a direct link between teenage marijuana use and decreased cognitive functioning (Wiley, 2012). According to the article, the deficits are more pronounced in males than in females, and the areas affected include cognitive inhibitions, sustained attention, and sequencing ability.

As before mentioned, marijuana is a strong indicator of other drug abuse, most often alcohol. Because it is rare for a teenager to be a user of marijuana alone and not alcohol, it is important that we understand what effects the two substances mixed can have. Marijuana does indeed have an interactive effect when paired with an intoxicant such as alcohol. In testing, subjects' brains were monitored during both alcohol and marijuana use, and they were asked to perform verbal tests. There was no difference in the performance of marijuana users, alcohol users, and users of both simultaneously. This proves that marijuana has many of the same detrimental effects on mental ability and coherency that alcohol does (Schweinsburg, Schweinsburg, Nagel, Eyster, & Tapert, 2011). One interesting difference was found, however: the actual brain activity patterns of the subjects varied depending on what intoxicants or combination was being used. This means that marijuana and alcohol affect different parts of the brain and its functioning, and used together they yield even worse results to simple verbal tests.

Because of the stage of developing that a teenager's brain is still in at the time of adolescence, substance abuse has more profound and, in some cases, longer lasting effects (Solowij, Jones, Rozman, Davis, Ciarocchi, Heaven,

& Yücel, 2011). In a study of 16-20 year old substance users, marijuana users performed the worst on a memory and learning test, tested against alcohol users, and non-substance-users. How badly they performed was dependent on the duration, quantity, frequency, and age of onset of marijuana use. The younger the age and the more frequent/heavy the use, the worse participants performed (Solowij, Jones, Rozman, Davis, Ciarocchi, Heaven, & Yücel, 2011).

Although there are clear negative effects, some states have legal allocations for what is commonly referred to as medical marijuana. The temporary physical effects of marijuana have been shown to help treat symptoms and ailments such as: nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy, anxiety, and most commonly, pain and muscle symptoms. According to an article from the journal *Pharmacotherapy*, “Studies of medical cannabis show significant improvement in various types of pain and muscle spasticity. Reported adverse effects are typically not serious, with the most common being dizziness. Safety concerns regarding cannabis include the increased risk of developing schizophrenia with adolescent use, impairments in memory and cognition, accidental pediatric ingestions, and lack of safety packaging for medical cannabis formulations (Borgelt, Franson, Nussbaum, & Wang, 2013).”

Techniques and methods to try and prevent the onset of marijuana abuse by teenagers are many, and professionals disagree as to what is the most effective approach. Drug prevention and education teams such as PRIDE Youth Programs, YADAPP, DARE, and thousands of others are prevalent in our communities and even schools systems. Yet teenage use is still on the rise.

Research into youth assets has helped shine light on the way young people are influenced in their lifestyle choices. Social workers define assets as environmental variables that can have either a positive or negative impact on youth behaviors. Examples of common youth assets are family, friends, peers, and teachers. In an article about youth assets and marijuana use run by the *Journal of*

Alcohol & Drug Education, the authors stressed that they have a widely varied effect on adolescent use and knowledge of drugs (Dunn, Kitts, Lewis, Goodrow, & Scherzer, 2011). The results concluded that prevention programs based on an asset development model are not very effective and should be reconsidered.

The strong and far-reaching effects of peer pressure do not need to be proved in this essay. Suffice it to say, the social networking emphasis in schools plays a critical role on the lifestyle choices of its members. Environments in which classmates, friends, and even role models use marijuana raise the likelihood that a given young person will also experiment with the drug. If 10% of one's fellow social members use marijuana, and ignoring possible additional factors, the probability that the individual will also use it increases by 5% (Ali, Amialchuk, & Dwyer, 2011). Education and awareness programs that promote total abstinence, such as the ones previously mentioned, have shown the most potential in having lasting effects on children and teenagers.

Too often, marijuana is viewed as confusing, elusive contraband with unclear implications. The aura of mystery that shrouds it is oftentimes what prompts adolescents to experiment with it in the first place. A common myth is that marijuana is not an addicting substance. Others say it is the classic "gateway" drug leading to experimenting with "hard" drugs. They are seeking answers. Scientists are too, and more and more actual results are being published about marijuana use and its effects. With this information, initiatives to combat the rise of teenage marijuana abuse are becoming better equipped to glean positive results. Even with this, however, there is still no fail-proof system that has been found to be the best concerning prevention measures.

My friend continued using marijuana throughout adolescence. Although not scientific or tested in a control group, evidence such as increasingly poorer school performance, subtle personality changes, and a tendency to experiment with other illegal substances were brought to the surface. To quote my friend, "I'm not addicted to it.

It's not really addicting. But it's mentally addicting.” This is an example of a teenager who regularly partakes in marijuana use – daily, even. In cases such as this one, the adolescent was well educated about the potential side effects of marijuana, and still chose to use the substance. But answers to the many questions about teen marijuana use are being discovered, and some of the confusion is being dispelled. Researchers aren't stopping here – studies are still being done and social workers are still determined to find new ways to curb this phenomenon.

References

Ali, M., Amialchuk, A., & Dwyer, D. S. (2011). The social contagion effect of marijuana use among adolescents. *PLoS One*, 6(1), 1-6.
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0016183

This article discusses the effects that social networking has on marijuana use among teenagers. It is written by Mir Ali, Aliaksandr Amialchuck, and Debra Dwyer for the open-access journal *PLoS One*. The authors are affiliated not only with research institutes such as the University of Toledo, but also the Food and Drug Administration. The research attempts to evaluate the role of peer social networks in explaining marijuana use in adolescents. A sample of nationally represented adolescents was used in the study, according to the authors. The independent variables such as close friends and classmates were all taken into account. After explaining the data used and found, the article concludes that the effects of peer influence are significant indicators of marijuana use, even when making allowances for biases that could occur in the study or participants. More specifically, the study found that in a 10% increase in the proportion of close friends and classmates who use marijuana, the probability that an individual will choose to use marijuana is increased by 5%.

The research presented in this article is beneficial to my paper because of its facts on how much peer pressure affects young people and their lifestyle choices. Social

networks play a critical role in influencing the members involved, and they can be positive influencers or negative ones. The article explains the findings of the research and proves that marijuana use is linked to social perceptions and attitudes expressed by young people's peers.

Borgelt, L. M., Franson, K. L., Nussbaum, A. M., & Wang, G. S. (2013). The pharmacologic and clinical effects of medical cannabis. *Pharmacotherapy*, 33(2), 195-209. doi: 10.1002/phar.1187

This article was published in the journal *Pharmacotherapy* in February of 2013. It focused on the effects of medical marijuana in states that have legalized it, such as California and Wisconsin. The authors provide information about why it is prescribed, what is used to treat, and side effects. This article is helpful to my paper because it provides a different perspective on the uses of marijuana, not just negative ones. The data presented shed light on the legalized form of marijuana and the pros and cons of prescribing a drug with psychoactive properties to teenagers and adults.

Dunn, M. S., Kitts, C., Lewis, S., Goodrow, B., & Scherzer, G. D. (2011). Effects of youth assets on adolescent alcohol, tobacco, marijuana use, and sexual behavior. *Journal of Alcohol & Drug Education*, 55(3), 23-40. Retrieved from www.ebscohost.com.

This article is written by five professionals (Michael Dunn, Cathy Kitts, Sandy Lewis, Bruce Goodrow, and Gary Scherzer) from around the United States, all of whom hold advanced degrees. The article was published in the *Journal of Alcohol & Drug Education* in December of 2011 and deals with the fact that adolescent use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and sexual behavior is a risk to well-being, health, and even life ambitions. The research consisted of surveying a random selection of high school students aged 14 to 18 years old. Participants were from two different public school districts in rural Tennessee. The survey assessed behaviors and knowledge concerning drugs and sexual behavior. According to the researchers, results showed that many of the students had engaged in both drug use and sexual behaviors in the past 30 days.

The authors stressed that assets (aspects of life that are variables and can have either a negative or positive impact on youth behaviors, such as peers, families, teachers, etc.) have a varied effect on adolescent use and knowledge of drugs and sex. The results concluded that prevention programs based on an asset development model are not very effective and should be reconsidered. This article helped my paper by explaining some of the external factors that can encourage or discourage the abuse of marijuana by teens.

Falls, B. J., Wish, E. D., Garnier, L. M., Caldiera, K. M., O'Grady, K. E., Vincent, K. B., & Arria, A. M. (2011). The association between early conduct problems and early marijuana use in college students. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 20(3), 221-236. doi: 10.1080/1067828X.2011.581900

The authors of this article researched the correlation between adolescent use of marijuana and early conduct problems and wrote this article about it for the *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*. They are all associated with the University of Maryland. The research was part of a larger study and focused on a sample of 1,076 college students that comprised three groups: marijuana users who began use prior to age 15, those who began use after age 15, and nonusers. Results found that early marijuana use was associated with presence of conduct problems as listed in the DSM-IV, such as aggression, theft, disobeying of rules, and running away from home. Late use of marijuana, however did not affect conduct the same way.

This article is useful for my paper in that it shows that there is a link between young teen use of marijuana and teen conduct. This could be a potential indicator of those who are more at risk and likely to engage in illegal use of marijuana. Conversely, the presence of many early conduct problems could indicate the strong possibility of marijuana use as well. Studies support the fact that teen use of marijuana does not come without consequences, other than just legal and health ones.

John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (2012). Keep your eye on... .
Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter, 28(7), 2.

This article, published in the *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter* in July, 2012, talks about the type of research that is currently being done on the impact teen marijuana use has on cognitive functioning. It is a summary of a study done by the Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society. Researchers found that marijuana use is in fact linked to poorer cognitive functioning in older teens. They also found that it is more pronounced in males than in females. The things affected significantly were: sustained attention, cognitive inhibitions, psychomotor speed, and sequencing ability.

This article is very helpful to my paper because it provides facts on the effects that marijuana has on teenager's cognitive abilities and performance. A loss of skill in these areas is significant to the ability to lead one's life with the most potential possible. Obviously damage to cognitive functions is a real and undesirable side effect to the use of marijuana. The research proves some more of the dangers of adolescent marijuana use and the threat it poses to future generations.

Keyes, K. M., Schulenberg, J. E., O'Malley, P. M., Johnston, L. D., Bachman, J. G., Li, G., & Hasin, D. (2011). The social norms of birth cohorts and adolescent marijuana use in the united states. *Addiction*, 106(10), 1790-1800. doi: 10.1111/j.1360-0443.2011.03485.x

A combined effort of Katherine Keyes, John Schulenberg, Patrick O'Malley, Lloyd Johnston, Jerald Bachman, Guohua Li, and Deborah Hasin, this article was published in the journal *Addiction* in October of 2011. The researching authors are all from research institutes at Columbia University and the University of Michigan. It focuses on the fact that most research on social norms concerning marijuana use has been more focused on individual attitudes rather than the influence of larger-level society. The research sought to determine the relationship between the opinions of certain birth cohorts and their use

of marijuana, specifically young adults and teenagers. Birth cohort is defined as a group of people who were born around or during the same time relatively, and tend to have been raised in the current mindset and attitudes of that time. The participants were students from grades 8, 10, and 12. The results showed that birth cohorts exhibiting stronger disapproval of the use of marijuana were significantly less likely to experiment with it, regardless of independent attitudes toward, and perceptions of, marijuana use.

The information presented in this article supported my paper by providing more information about the power of social surroundings to influence the use of marijuana among teens. It also showed the impact that social norms existent at the time of have on raising children to avoid or accept marijuana. The general views of the people at a given time are reflected in the way the next generation behaves, all other independent variables aside.

Schweinsburg, A. D., Schweinsburg, B. C., Nagel, B. J., Eyler, L. T., & Tapert, S. F. (2011). Neural correlates of verbal learning in adolescent alcohol and marijuana users. *Addiction*, *106*(3), 564-573. doi: 10.1111/j.1360-0443.2010.03197.x

The journal *Addiction* published this article by authors from Yale University, Oregon Health and Science University, and the University of California in March of 2011. The article explores exactly how the brain responds during verbal learning among teen users of marijuana. The participants in the research were from local public schools and divided into the following groups: controls (limited alcohol and marijuana use), binge drinkers, marijuana users, and binge drinking marijuana users. The results showed that there was no difference among the groups in performing verbal tests – proving that marijuana can have similar effects as alcohol and vice versa. They did, however, show a difference in actual brain activity patterns during testing. This study makes the valid point that alcohol and marijuana are the two most common substances used by teenagers. There is a strong possibility that use of one indicates the use of the other as well. Therefore, it is important that research such as this is being

done on the effects of not only one or the other, but what both of them used together can have.

This article was helpful in writing my paper because of the fact that marijuana does not only have unique effects on the health and wellness of teens, but also interactive ones when paired with the other most common intoxicant, alcohol. While this paper focuses on the use of marijuana, it would be leaving out part of the picture if we were to ignore the potential mixed effects that marijuana can have with alcohol, especially since the two seem to go historically hand in hand.

Solowij, N., Jones, K., Rozman, M., Davis, S., Ciarocchi, J., Heaven, P. ... Yücel, M. (2011). Verbal learning and memory in adolescent cannabis users, alcohol users and non-users. *Psychopharmacology*, 216(1), 131-144. doi: 10.1007/s00213-011-2203-x

This article, written by authors from the University of Wollongong, was published in the academic journal *Psychopharmacology*. This study investigated the effects that long-term marijuana use has on memory. It is believed that adolescent users are more vulnerable to memory impairment and adverse neurocognitive effects than adults. A sample of 181 16-20 year olds was grouped into marijuana users, alcohol users, and nonusers. Out of the groups, marijuana users scored the worst on a memory and learning test. How badly they performed was dependent on the duration, quantity, frequency, and age of onset of marijuana use. The earlier the age of onset was correlated with worse memory performance on the Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test. There was significant proof that adolescent marijuana use negatively affects the developing brain. This article supports my paper by showing the dangers of teen marijuana abuse, specifically the affect it has on the brain and its functioning.