

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE ON LEGALIZATION OF RECREATIONAL CANNABIS

As part of a study commissioned by the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, RAND completed an evidence review to examine the effects of adult-use cannabis legalization on several categories of policy-relevant outcomes.

OUTCOMES OF FOCUS	FINDINGS GENERALLY POINT TO...
CANNABIS USE AND PERCEPTIONS	
Cannabis prevalence among adults	Increases in past-month use; larger effects after retail opening.
Cannabis prevalence among youth/young adults	Mixed; modest increases among young adults, null to small increases among youth.
Cannabis initiation	Increases among adults; larger effects with retail access.
Perceptions of cannabis harms	Decreases in perceived risk among youth.
<i>Modes of consumption</i>	<i>Limited causal evidence. Sales data show shifts toward concentrates and edibles.</i>
USE OF OTHER SUBSTANCES	
Opioid analgesic prescribing	Modest reductions that may have attenuated over time; effects may be smaller in settings with lower rates of inappropriate prescribing or misuse.
Tobacco use	Increases in cannabis-tobacco co-use but no increase in tobacco or nicotine use overall.
Alcohol use	Small increases in consumption; increases in alcohol-cannabis co-use among adults.
Other substance use or distribution	Mixed; some limited evidence of benzodiazepine prescribing reductions.
SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS AND POISONINGS	
Cannabis use disorder	Stable or declining treatment admissions despite increased use prevalence.
Cannabis-related poisonings	Large increases, especially pediatric (after edible legalization).
Cannabis-related emergency room and hospital visits	Increases in cannabis-related encounters.
Opioid overdose mortality	Mixed and inconclusive, with more recent studies indicating potential harms; insufficient evidence for causal claims.
Other substance disorders and adverse outcomes	Insufficient evidence for causal claims.
OTHER HEALTH OUTCOMES	
Mental health	Mixed and inconclusive; heterogeneous effects across populations.
Suicide and suicidality	Mixed; some evidence of increases among youth in early-adoption states.
<i>Pain</i>	<i>Limited causal evidence for policy effects; but randomized controlled trials of cannabinoids indicate possible small benefits for improving pain severity.</i>
TRAFFIC CRASHES AND MORTALITY	
	No consistent effect from legalization alone. Overall increases after retail stores open; appears to be driven by a subgroup of states.
LABOR MARKET AND OTHER ECONOMIC OUTCOMES	
Labor markets and income support	Small or null overall effects; agriculture employment increases.
Tourism	Increases in early-adopting states; likely attenuated for later adopters.
<i>Home prices</i>	<i>Limited causal evidence; studies show mixed local effects depending on jurisdiction and study design.</i>
SOCIAL OUTCOMES	
Population change	Small positive effects in early-adoption states; may not generalize to late adopter states.
Crime and arrests	Large decreases in cannabis possession arrests; null effects on violent and property crime.
<i>Homelessness</i>	<i>Limited peer-reviewed evidence.</i>
STATE BUDGETS	
	<i>Limited causal evidence; significant cannabis tax revenues, but magnitude varies by state; offset considerations apply.</i>

Italicized categories do not have sufficient peer-reviewed quasi-experimental evidence to establish causal relationships; descriptive or observational findings are summarized for these outcomes. For more information, please see Annex I at [RMFF.org/cannabis](https://www.rmff.org/cannabis).