

Kids who smoke pot like to listen to music that mentions it

Researchers have counted how often popular recording artists mention lighting up some cannabis in their songs, and found that teens who hear the most references are more likely to have experimented with the drug. Obvious? Maybe, but the researchers make a couple of interesting points.

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All of us are awash in various media cues that exert subtle influences on our behavior and choices. But even when a correlation is found, separating cause and effect is extremely difficult—have we adopted a habit, such as smoking, because of exposure to it in (for example) movies, or does a separate personality trait predispose us to both the habit and certain movies? This is especially true in adolescents and teens, whose personality traits are still evolving. A new study on cannabis use and musical listening habits doesn't delve in to cause and effect relationships, but it does find a correlation between musical references to the use of the drug and the tendency to actually use it.

The study involved about 1,200 high school students in the Pittsburgh area who completed a survey that included a variety of questions about demographic information, drug and alcohol use, grades, parental involvement, etc. Included in the survey were some basic questions about the students' listening habits, such as who their favorite artist is and how much time they spent listening to music.

The interesting twist to the work is that the authors then went back and listened to songs by the artists in question, and compiled a measure of how often that artist mentioned cannabis use in an hour of music (sadly, there's nothing in the methods section about what slang terms were deemed a reference). Combined with the number of hours spent listening to music, they created an estimate of musical exposure to the idea of lighting up.

Now, there's an obvious issue here, in that different teens probably listen to a single artist to greater or lesser extents, something the authors seem to recognize. Another problem comes in their measure of cannabis use. The "ever used" category includes anyone who had a single puff, even once, and the "currently using" includes anyone who had an experience that fits that definition within the past 30 days. Those are the only categories the authors used, and they're fairly crude, providing no real sense of a person's attraction to the drug.

In any case, the authors find a large number of variables are associated with both categories of cannabis use, and they're largely what you'd expect: lax parenting, adventure seeking behavior, older age, and lower grades. But their measure of exposure to cannabis via music correlated with recent use of the real thing, with those that had the most exposure having double the odds of having used within the last 30 days. This association held up through multivariate analysis, which controlled for the other potential contributing influences. The association between ever having used and musical exposure, however, wound up not being statistically significant.

The authors performed a second analysis, one that looked at alcohol use, to check whether the correlation was with a more general attraction to mind altering substances. No association was found, however.

Despite the study's limitations, the results probably shouldn't be surprising, as exposure through media has been associated with behaviors ranging from smoking to sexual activity. But, as the authors admit, their study is incapable of providing any causal information. (Although their introduction makes it pretty clear they' really like to believe that exposure via media helps push teens towards usage).

Nevertheless, the authors make a couple of interesting points in the discussion. The media influence, in contrast to any drug education programs, is pervasive and year-round, making it likely to drown out the influence of those programs. Given that, education programs might be more effective if they focused on teaching teens how to recognize and interpret media influences. Given the many things that media exposure is linked with, this sort of media literacy could obviously have a more significant impact than a behavior-specific educational program.

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