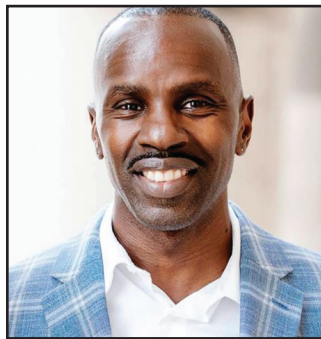


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CARLOS T. CARTER

Cannabis use and youth

It's important to note that while cannabis can have positive effects medically for large portions of the population, it can negatively impact youth who use and abuse it. We spoke with Carlos T. Carter, President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh about his thoughts on cannabis use and young people.

What are your thoughts on the rising use of cannabis?

I know there are a lot of positive medicinal effects that can help people manage pain, but it's alarming that cannabis use impacts youth in such negative ways. It concerns me that it impacts their brain development and that it makes mental health challenges worse. When users seek drugs to self-medicate, they are not addressing their underlying problems and they tend to get worse. It's a vicious cycle.

I'm concerned that young people don't realize the dangers of fentanyl and other substances some marijuana is laced with, that could be putting their lives in jeopardy. Quite literally, they could die from taking that hit. It's not worth it.

It also concerns me that youth don't understand that marijuana is still illegal in Pennsylvania.

How do you think cannabis use and the pandemic have intersected in our Black communities?

We all know the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Black and other marginalized communities. Stress and the overwhelming burden of the pandemic on families drives people to seek out marijuana to deal with anxiety. They feel they need it to cope. People are stressed out. Increased poverty, increased isolation has all led to people seeking ways to self-medicate.

Whether warranted or not, Black youth are already at a higher risk of police encounters. Participating in cannabis use only adds additional targets to them and puts them at an increased risk of being convicted and incarcerated.

What are some questions you have for future research on cannabis use and youth?

What is driving youth to use? Is it ease of use, influencers? Are they feeling pressured?

First and foremost, we need to truly understand why our youth are using cannabis. Then we can work with them to develop healthier alternatives.

Important note: According to marijuanaandthelaw.com, possession of small amounts of marijuana is decriminalized in certain cities throughout the state of Pennsylvania, but recreational use remains illegal. Residents with qualifying conditions must obtain a medical cannabis ID card to purchase and use medical marijuana. The possession limit for patients is a 30-day supply. Home cultivation for any purpose is a felony.



No healthy relationship between Cannabis and young Black people

More young people are using cannabis than ever before, which is cause for concern in the Black community. Black people have been and continue to be impacted by drugs and racial bias.

For example:

- * Black neighborhoods are targeted with more tobacco ads than other neighborhoods.

- * When it comes to pregnancy and drug testing, Black mothers are more likely to be tested and judged unfit than White mothers.

- * According to the ACLU, "...despite roughly equal usage rates, Blacks are 3.73 times more likely than Whites to be arrested for cannabis."

- * How much has cannabis use increased?

- * In two studies by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:

- * Over 3 million people, ages 12-17, used cannabis in the past year.

- * In the 18-22-year-old group, cannabis use is at a 35-year high.

- * More youth reported using cannabis than any other illicit drug.

- * Why the increase among young people?

- * Cannabis is available and affordable illegally in neighborhoods, and legally with a medical cannabis card.

- * Cannabis is more potent now than ever before — and can be smoked, vaped, applied to the skin as oil, and digested in beverages, candy and baked goods. That means it's easier to become dependent on it.

- * Cannabis is legal in many states, which may give it more credibility.

- * Some celebrity and social media influencers endorse cannabis, which may make it more main-

stream.

- * Cannabis is often thought of as "natural" and not truly harmful.

- * As more states legalize cannabis, it will still be illegal for anyone under 21. Why? Because, like alcohol, cannabis can harm developing brains.

- * What does the research show?

- * Short-term cannabis use may lead to problems in school, trouble remembering things, aggressive actions, car accidents, and risky sexual behavior. It can also interfere with prescription drugs.

- * If a user has mental health conditions, cannabis may make them worse. This includes mood changes and thoughts about suicide. For a small percentage of users, it can also increase the risk of losing touch with the real world.

- * Long-term effects may lead to breathing problems, a drop in the desire to go to school or hold a job, and severe mental health problems — especially if a user has been diagnosed with mood disorders, like depression, or has a history of, or a family history of, schizophrenia.

- * Long-term use can also lead to addiction. The CDC estimates about 30% of cannabis users have a cannabis use disorder. This can look a lot like alcohol addiction, which takes control of a person's life and causes withdrawal symptoms.

- * Dr. Natacha DeGenna, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh studies cannabis and tobacco use in young people.

- * In one study, Dr. DeGenna and her colleagues are asking for input from young, pregnant women, including a large number who identify as Black or biracial. "Many of the women use cannabis during pregnancy and they are helping us understand why they do. They are also allowing us to



DR. NATACHA DEGENNA

study what happens to their babies' development" she explains.

This study is based on older research that has shown long-term effects of prenatal marijuana exposure. One of the key findings? When babies were exposed to cannabis during pregnancy, they were more likely to be born with a lower birth weight. They were also more likely to have childhood behavior problems and use cannabis themselves as teenagers.

"We studied these babies as they grew up," says Dr. DeGenna. We checked in with them at ages 14, 16, and 22. What we found was that using cannabis before you're 15 places you at a greater risk of cannabis during pregnancy, they were more likely to be born with a lower birth weight. They were also more likely to have childhood behavior problems and use cannabis themselves as teenagers.

"Is there ever a good time to use?"

"Children should not use cannabis mainly because it impacts their brain development, among other serious health concerns," says Dr. DeGenna. Even at age 25, there are big health risks to think about.

"Is there a way for people 25 and older to have a healthy relationship with cannabis?" asks Dr. DeGenna. "It depends."

What should you consider if —

and before — you decide to use?

Dr. DeGenna suggests people think carefully about using cannabis — before they light up. "If you're thinking about it, consider the risks vs the benefits first," she explains. For example:

- * Have you ever had problems with depression or anxiety - or have a family history of mood disorders?

- * Are you pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant?

- * Are you taking other prescription drugs that could interact with cannabis?

- * Are you using cannabis in a way that adds to your life rather than takes away from it? Are you smoking weed occasionally with friends, for example, vs smoking it alone because you're sad or angry?

- * Are you using it in a way that doesn't put you or others at risk? For example, smoking weed and driving or going to work?

- * Is using weed your decision — not someone else's?

- * Do you know and understand what weed can do to you when you smoke, vape, drink, and/or eat it? That includes health, legal, and personal risks.

- * What effect does your use of cannabis have on other people — those you know and those you don't?

"Using cannabis is a serious decision," says Dr. DeGenna. "The goal is to make a well-informed choice. Weigh the pros and cons, but please consider not using it until you're at least 25."

She continues, "If you're younger than 25 and using now — or if you're pregnant and using — consider cutting back with a goal of quitting. Even a small decrease can have a positive impact on your health and your baby's development."



HUMAN BRAIN MADE OF MARIJUANA LEAVES (GETTY IMAGES STOCK PHOTO)