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A behavioral economic approach to assessing demand for marijuana.

[Collins RL](#)¹, [Vincent PC](#)¹, [Yu J](#)², [Liu L](#)², [Epstein LH](#)³.

Author information

Abstract

In the United States, marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug. Its prevalence is growing, particularly among young adults. Behavioral economic indices of the relative reinforcing efficacy (RRE) of substances have been used to examine the appeal of licit (e.g., alcohol) and illicit (e.g., heroin) drugs. The present study is the first to use an experimental, simulated purchasing task to examine the RRE of marijuana. Young-adult (M age = 21.64 years) recreational marijuana users (N = 59) completed a computerized marijuana purchasing task designed to generate demand curves and the related RRE indices (e.g., intensity of demand-purchases at lowest price; Omax-max. spent on marijuana; Pmax-price at which marijuana expenditure is max). Participants "purchased" high-grade marijuana across 16 escalating prices that ranged from \$0/free to \$160/joint. They also provided 2 weeks of real-time, ecological momentary assessment reports on their marijuana use. The purchasing task generated multiple RRE indices. Consistent with research on other substances, the demand for marijuana was inelastic at lower prices but became elastic at higher prices, suggesting that increases in the price of marijuana could lessen its use. In regression analyses, the intensity of demand, Omax, and Pmax, and elasticity each accounted for significant variance in real-time marijuana use. These results provide support for the validity of a simulated marijuana purchasing task to examine marijuana's reinforcing efficacy. This study highlights the value of applying a behavioral economic framework to young-adult marijuana use and has implications for prevention, treatment, and policies to regulate marijuana use.

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