

Research Shows TV PSAs Effective In Reducing Teen Marijuana Use

BETHESDA, MD (NIH) – Researchers have demonstrated that television public service announcements (PSAs) designed for and targeted to specific teen personality-types can significantly reduce their marijuana use. In a study published in the February 2001 issue of the “American Journal of Public Health,” researchers report that PSAs with an anti-marijuana use message resulted in at least a 26.7 percent drop in the use of that drug among the targeted teen population.

“This study shows that public health messages can have a significant impact if they are prepared and delivered appropriately,” says Dr. Alan I. Leshner, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

The PSAs were designed to appeal to the 50 percent of teens who tested high (above the median) on sensation seeking. Teens with this personality trait are much more at risk for using drugs, and for using drugs at an earlier age, than are adolescents who test low as sensation seekers.

Dr. Philip Palmgreen, head of the University of Kentucky research team that conducted the study, said that sensation seeking is a “personality trait associated with the need for novel, emotionally intense stimuli and the willingness to take risks to obtain such stimulation.”

He and his colleagues used this trait as the basis for developing SENTAR, a prevention approach targeted at sensation seekers. SENTAR encompasses several components, including designing high-sensation-value prevention messages that are novel, dramatic, and attention-getting, and placing these messages in high-sensation-value contexts, such as TV programs that are favorites of high sensation seekers. This study shows that not only does a SENTAR-based campaign get the attention of high sensation seeking teens, but that such campaigns can also change their drug use behaviors.

To establish the extent of teen marijuana use prior to the campaigns and to assess the effect of the campaigns, 100 randomly selected public school students were interviewed each month in each county for 32 months. The interviews started 8 months before the first campaign and ended 8 months after the last campaign. The teens were in grades 7 through 10 at the time of the initial interviews. In total, more than 3,000 teens were interviewed in each county.

Pre-exposure levels of marijuana use and other substances by 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in both counties were found to be consistent with figures reported by NIDA’s annual Monitoring the Future (MTF) study. For example, 25.5 percent of Fayette County and 20.3 percent of Knox County 12th graders had used marijuana in the past 30 days, in line with 1997 and 1998 national MTF 12th grade estimates of 23.7 percent and 22.8 percent.

The campaigns, however, resulted in significant reductions in current marijuana use (defined as use within the past 30 days) by the target population. The campaigns were also successful in reversing the usual trend of more teens beginning to use marijuana as they get older. In Knox County, effects of the campaign were still evident several months after its conclusion. There, the estimated drop in the relative proportion of high sensation seekers using marijuana was 26.7 percent.

As expected, the campaigns had no effect on teens characterized as low sensation seekers, a group that already exhibited low levels of marijuana use.

“While these findings do not indicate that all anti-drug PSAs will produce behavioral change, nor that PSAs alone should be the only avenue to prevention, they do show that

SENTAR-based PSAs can play an important role in drug abuse prevention,” Dr. Palmgreen concluded.