Abstract: Is Marijuana Safer than Alcohol? Insights from Users’ Self-Reports

Those who favor legalizing marijuana often argue that marijuana is safer than alcohol. While alcohol is certainly more dangerous in some respects, risk is multi-faceted, and this paper demonstrates that marijuana users report more problems with their use than do alcohol users.

Over the past 30 years, household surveys in the United States have asked marijuana and alcohol users parallel questions about whether use of that substance has caused them problems. For each pair of questions, the number of “yes” answers per past-month user is computed for each substance, and these proportions compared.

The relative rates vary by question from somewhat below 1.0 to as high as 4.5, but most are between 1.5 and 3.0, suggesting that marijuana as used in the U.S. has been about 1.5 to 3.0 times more likely to generate problem reports among its users than has alcohol. Marijuana appears riskier on questions about ability to fulfill functional life roles; alcohol matches and sometimes exceeds marijuana on questions that pertain to physical safety.

In every year from 2000 – 2012 the proportion of past-month marijuana users who DSM-IV criteria for marijuana dependence was 2.3 – 3.3 times as high as the corresponding proportion among alcohol users.

A special supplement in 1996 examined self-reported rates of impaired driving. Marijuana users reported two to three times as many instances of impaired driving per past-month user who drove as did alcohol users. Most who reported driving while marijuana-impaired also reported driving within two hours of using both alcohol and marijuana.