

Weeding out the Stigma: Experiences Shared by Older Veterans

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Background

- Cannabis use today is the highest it has been in three decades, approaching **36.5%** prevalence for past year use (Schulenberg et al., 2017).
- In states where medical cannabis is legal, **41%** of Veterans who used cannabis in the past year reported doing so for **medical** purposes and were likely to be **65 years +** (Davis et al., 2018).
- Research continues to point to medical cannabis as a **potentially effective alternative** to opioids and benzodiazepines for treating a range of medical conditions.
- Baby Boomers + War on Drugs + Vietnam + Increase in recent cannabis legalization = *Unique Opportunity*

Research Aims

In our parent study, we quantitatively develop a deeper understanding of cannabis use in older (60 years +) U.S. Veterans who are using cannabis as a substitute or complement for opioids and/or benzodiazepines. With a diverse subsample we:

- **Qualitatively develop an understanding of stigma associated with medical cannabis use among older U.S. Veterans**

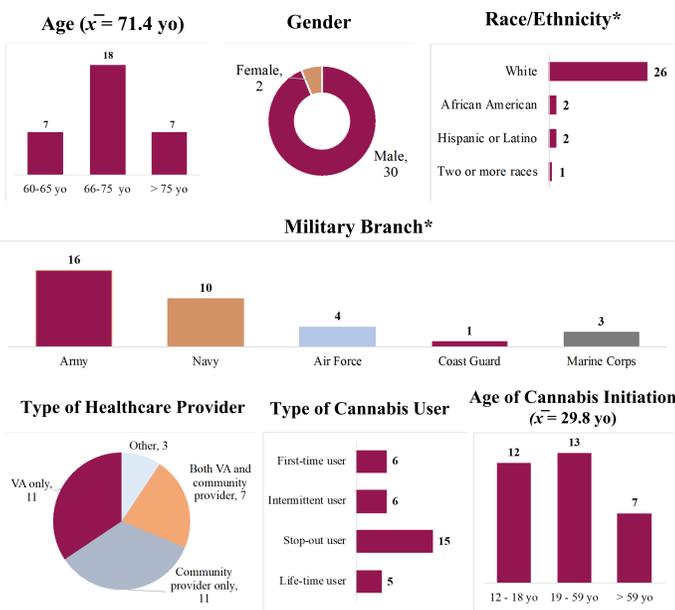
Methods

- Surveyed 121 older veterans (60 years +) who were enrolled in the Illinois Medical Cannabis Patient Program (MCP) during Fall 2020
- Utilized maximum variation sampling to select a subset of 32 Veterans
- Participants represented diversity regarding age of cannabis initiation, type of cannabis user, military branch, type of healthcare provider, and race/ethnicity
- From November 2020 to February 2021, two researchers conducted 30-minute audiotaped semi-structured interviews
- Interview topics included (1) use of cannabis, opioids, and benzodiazepines, (2) interactions with medical providers, (3) stigma regarding cannabis use, and (4) educational materials for older Veterans
- **We present findings from the third topic regarding stigma associated with using cannabis**

Qualitative Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes
- Weekly meetings among two coders ensued to debrief on coding procedures, reflect on biases and interpretations, and reach consensus regarding coding discrepancies
- Final codebook reached an **87%** inter-rater reliability
- Two coders (First and Last Author) independently coded the transcripts and employed a rigorous thematic analysis approach using NVivo12 QSR
- We provide the **three** overarching themes and exemplary quotes from a variety of participants

Participant Demographics (N = 32)



Stigma Code & Overarching Themes

Stigma: Any discussion about stereotypes or stigma, worry about people noticing, or worry about the perceptions of others

Examples: If participants talk about being called a ‘pot head’ and any discussion about things such as Reefer Madness, etc.

- Stereotypes regarding people who use cannabis
- Hesitation of disclosing cannabis use with others
- Media portrayal (e.g., movies, policy) of cannabis users

Study’s Results

“Oh of course there is a stigma. Of course.”

➤ *Stereotypes regarding people who use cannabis*

“And a lot of people say you use cannabis, then **you must be a stoner**, you must be stoned all the time, no I’m not and I don’t lose my capability” – Participant 16

“Yeah, we’re still considered potheads, there’s **no difference between a pot user and a meth user**, uh, you know, those sorts of. The ones [stereotypes] that have always been around are still around.” – Participant 4

“Well, I guess there’s **negative stigma** with regards to people who use it because you know, for I guess they just, there’s some people who just thinking, I guess, anybody who would use it is a **drug addict**. And I know that’s not true because I’ve used cannabis and I’m not a drug addict. But that’s, **there’s a stigma** about that.” – Participant 13

➤ *Hesitation of disclosing cannabis use with others*

“Um yes, there is [stigma]. Yes, there is. There’s a lot of people out there that, you know, I live in a duplex. The **person next door would frown upon me for using cannabis**. So, I never smoke around the man, I never smoke around his family.” – Participant 26

“**I haven’t talked to anybody else about it**. I haven’t, other than family and friends that I told I was on it and is doing a great job.” – Participant 13

“For example, I would **never talk to any of my allopathic physicians about cannabis**. I once broached the topic with a psychiatrist, but again, only as a to *pose* the question what he thought about the potential for CBD to address anxiety, not that I’m **thinking** of doing A, B, or C” – Participant 19

➤ *Media portrayal of cannabis users*

“Yeah, and that’s the other thing I don’t think people realize, is that, you know, again **the whole sort of reefer madness kind of visual image pops into people’s heads like oh, my God**, I’m gonna smoke that stuff, I’m going to be stumbling around, I’m going to walk outside without my clothes on and I’m not gonna remember what happened to me.” – Participant 7

“Like my parents, you know, even though they were aware of my use, but they never wanted to try it, they were still stuck in the, you know, the, **the days of how it’s a gateway to other drugs and has all these problems**” – Participant 12

Discussion

- Public stigma → Self-stigma
 - Awareness, Agreement, Application (Fox et al., 2018)
- Stigma creates situations in which older Veterans are *hesitant* to disclose their use of cannabis with physicians, family and/or friends which can be dangerous and also socially isolating.
- Older Veterans may benefit from shared experiences about cannabis use for medical purposes, but this often does not occur.
- The empirically-based insights gained from this work have the potential to inform public health leaders, healthcare administrators, and public messaging regarding the use of medical cannabis.

Limitations

- Illinois-centric [Medical and Recreational laws]
- Phone-interviews completed during COVID-19
- Lack of women and diverse identities

Conclusions

- Continue conducting research and having conversations about medical cannabis use with older U.S. Veterans
- Discuss stigma and best practices with health care professionals about cannabis use (i.e., VA and community healthcare agencies)
- As a society, we should work towards altering the *negative* narrative of cannabis use

Thank you!

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