

# Social Norms of Alcohol and Cannabis Use

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 23 public and private colleges and universities in the state who work to lower high-risk behaviors by implementing strategic plans for prevention utilizing evidence-based strategies. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. This brief will focus on social norms of substance use for Missouri college students.

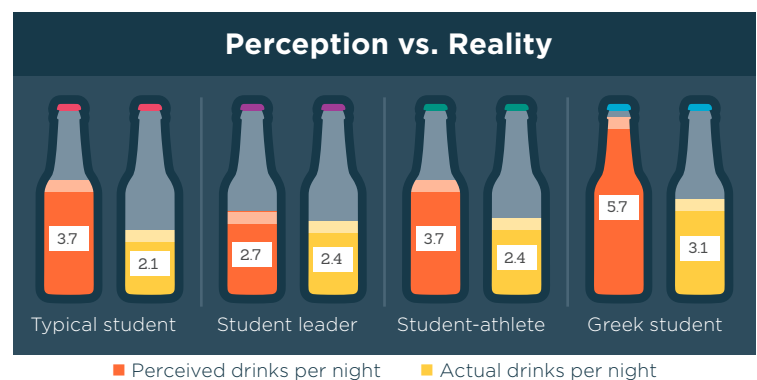
## Background

Perceptions hold importance and tend to drive behavior, thus creating social norms. A person may behave differently or use a substance at a different rate than they otherwise would if they perceive substance use to be common among other students. The Social Norms Theory suggests that our behavior is influenced by misperceptions of how our peers think and act. When used correctly, Social Norms Theory can be very effective in changing individual behavior by focusing on changing group-level misperceptions<sup>1</sup>. In this brief, the perception is the percentage of Missouri college students that reported they thought other students engage in a certain behavior. The reality is the percentage of Missouri college students who actually report engaging in a certain behavior. There are several sections on the MACHB that review social norms on campus. Due to the large gap between perceived and actual behaviors among college students, two of the most concerning topics on the MACHB are alcohol consumption on a typical night and cannabis use.

## Alcohol

The MACHB survey asks students to indicate how many drinks they consume on a typical night of drinking and how many drinks they believe other students consume on a typical night. The typical student reported consuming 2.1 drinks, but perceive that the typical student consumes 3.7 drinks on a

typical night of drinking. The survey also asks students to identify their campus involvement, thus providing data on the actual and perceived number of drinks consumed by student leaders, student-athletes, and Greek students. Student leaders reported consuming 2.4 drinks on a typical night of drinking, but students perceive other student leaders consume 2.7 drinks on a typical night of drinking. Student-athletes are perceived to consume 3.7 drinks, but in reality they consume much less, only reporting 2.5 drinks on a typical night of drinking. The biggest difference between perception and reality of number of drinks exists for Greek students. Students perceive that Greek students consume 5.7 drinks on a typical night of drinking, but in reality Greek students consume 3.1 drinks. The difference between perception and reality is 2.6 drinks.



Misperceptions also exist regarding frequency of drinking among the different student populations. Students believe that other students are drinking far more frequently than they really are. Forty-five

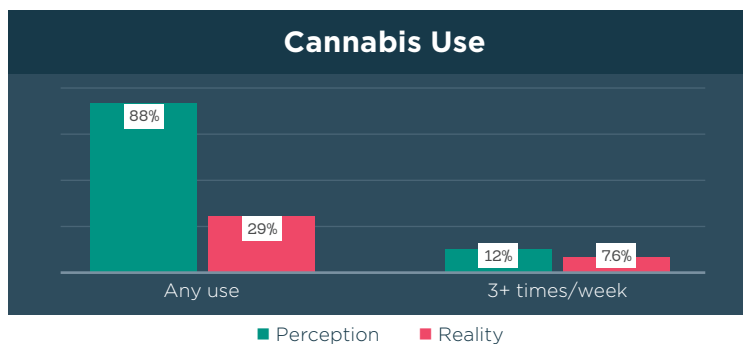
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percent (45%) of typical students report drinking 1-2 times a month or more, but the perception is nearly double this percentage (89%). Student-athletes have the highest rate of students who report not drinking, but students report believing that 95% of student-athletes drink. In reality, 73% of student-athletes report drinking. There is a similar trend for perception of student leaders' drinking prevalence: 90% of students believe student leaders drink, while actually only 75% of student leaders drink. The majority of students believe Greek students drink far more often than they do in reality; 87% of students believe Greek students drink on a weekly basis, but in reality only 47% of Greek students report drinking on a weekly basis.

## Cannabis

Missouri college students perceive that the typical student uses cannabis far more often than they actually do. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of Missouri college students believe the typical student uses cannabis, but only 29% of students report using cannabis products at least once in the past year. A misperception also exists regarding the percentage of students that report being frequent cannabis users, which is defined as using cannabis 3 or more times per week. Twelve percent (12%) of students believe the typical student is a frequent cannabis user, when in reality, only 7.6% of students are frequent users.



The MACHB survey also asks students to describe the attitudes of people in their lives regarding cannabis use. Seventy-six percent (76%) of students reported that their parents disapprove/strongly disapprove of cannabis use. Regarding the attitudes of close friends, students most often reported that they would have no opinion (40%) or disapprove/strongly disapprove (30%) of cannabis use. Sixty-three percent (63%) of students reported that other students most likely have no opinion regarding cannabis use. While most students perceive their parents to have a disapproving attitude about cannabis use, students generally feel that their close friends and other students most likely have no opinion about cannabis use. This perceived lack of opinion may affect students' beliefs regarding the acceptability of cannabis, and therefore likelihood of cannabis use.

## Summary

Currently, several campaigns across Missouri work to correct misperceptions of social norms on campus, and how they may be impacting the harmful behaviors of college students. Social norms campaigns have the power to change perceptions in a way that can impact reality of substance use behaviors. Posters and graphics demonstrating accurate data have become a common method of explaining social norms on campus in order to invalidate the frequent misperceptions that many students have towards fellow peers. Future implementations of the MACHB will continue to assess social norms related to alcohol and cannabis use on campus. To find more information and resources, please visit [pip.missouri.edu](http://pip.missouri.edu).

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Report prepared 8/25/20 by Bethany Johnston, Graduate Research Assistant. Data prepared by Dong Ding, Research Coordinator. Published January 2021.

1. LaMorte, W.W. (2019). Social Norms Theory.