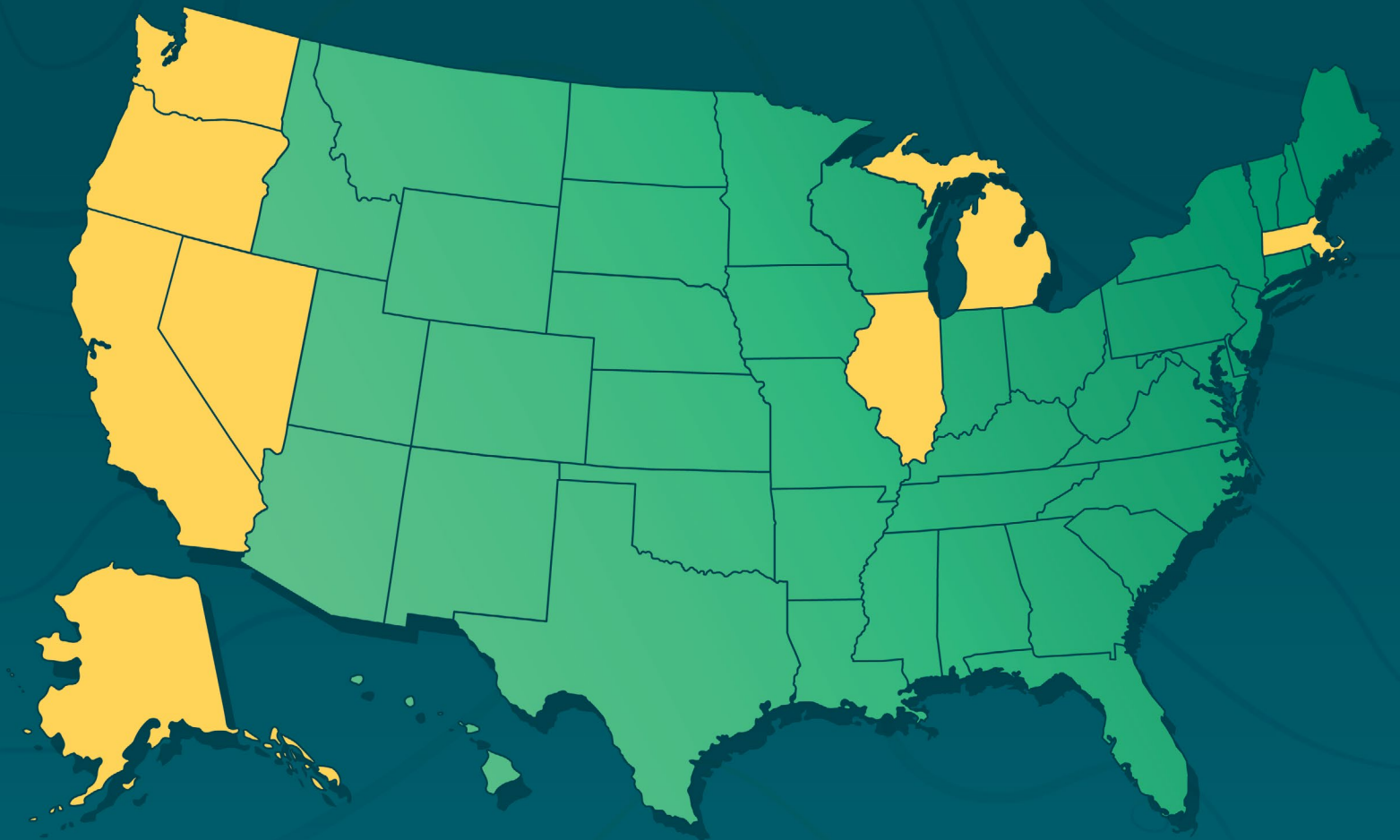


**“I LIKE NOT HAVING TO GO BEHIND  
THE DUMPSTER AT A TACO BELL”**

**CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES IN STATES  
WITH ESTABLISHED CANNABIS MARKETS**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Legal adult-use (AU) cannabis is well established in much of the United States, with nine states that have had at least five years of active cannabis sales. Existing studies on cannabis markets provide insight into how AU policy has been implemented, how the industry has evolved, and how the public has responded to legal cannabis. However, there has been little qualitative research asking cannabis consumers about their perceptions of and experiences with legalization.

To fill this important gap in our knowledge, we interviewed people in states with established AU cannabis markets, drawing on their lived experiences to speak to the real-world implications of this policy change. The goal of this study was to understand the perspectives and experiences of residents in states where AU cannabis has been legal for at least five years.

Across 37 interviews, interview participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the many benefits and limitations of this policy, as well as opportunities for improvement.

## What do people like about legalization?

Participants shared their opinions and perceptions about the positive impacts of AU cannabis legalization including:

- Reductions in arrests and incarceration for cannabis-related offenses
- Decreased stigma and increased normalization of cannabis use
- Increased safety and harm reduction
- Economic revitalization
- Increased access to both medical and AU dispensaries that have a wide variety of high-quality cannabis products.

## What do people not like about legalization?

Participants also shared their opinions and perceptions about negative impacts of AU legalization which included:

- Overregulation of AU cannabis
- Tax revenue is not being invested in their communities as promised. One participant from Alaska described, **“And, I mean, right now here in the city, they’re talking about closing down schools. So it’s like, where is the tax money that was supposed to be going towards the schools and public infrastructure and all that way?”**
- Concerns about problematic and underage cannabis use
- Concern about the increased presence of cannabis in public spaces

## What recommendations do people have about improving legalization?

Finally, participants provided recommendations for ways AU legalization can be improved:

- Greater transparency around policymaking and use of cannabis tax revenue
- Increased constituent involvement in policy implementation
- Reforms to protect small businesses, as a participant from Colorado described: **“I think that we should create programs that’s more support [for] small businesses and like, the idea that regulations should support all different types of small businesses, I think, has very much changed my perspective on how we legalize cannabis.”**
- Physical spaces for consumers to legally use cannabis

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of consumer perceptions of, and experiences with, AU legalization across different regulatory contexts.

**“So I [like] not having to go behind the dumpster at a Taco Bell to try to score some weed, but instead go to a nice, you know, establishment and buy it all legally.”**

- Observation summarized by one participant from Oregon

# INTRODUCTION

As of 2026, adult-use (AU) cannabis is legal in 24 states and Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup> Over the same period, the industry has become increasingly consolidated, with now only several large multi-state operators holding a growing share of legal markets.<sup>2</sup> This concentration is in stark contrast with the small business and social equity goals written into many state legalization laws.<sup>3</sup>

Federal law, meanwhile, is in flux. In April 2026, the federal government moved state-licensed medical cannabis to Schedule III but left AU cannabis in Schedule I, which presents regulatory and enforcement questions particularly in states with both medical and AU cannabis. As of July 2026, a broader rescheduling was still under consideration.<sup>4</sup>

The body of research on AU cannabis legalization has grown. Public acceptance of AU legalization has expanded, and the everyday stigma around using cannabis has decreased.<sup>5</sup> Where AU cannabis is legal, far fewer people are arrested for it.<sup>6,7</sup>

However, as AU stores opened, medical cannabis programs shrank, with enrollment climbing in states that legalized medical-use only and falling in states that added adult-use sales.<sup>8,9</sup> Despite this decrease in registered medical patients, it is unlikely that people have stopped using

cannabis for medical reasons. Enrollment counts can't capture whether people think about their own use as medicinal, recreational, or both.

Additionally, much of the existing research on adult-use legalization is quantitative. It measures and counts things such as arrest rates, prices, emergency room visits, and how often people use cannabis. Further, most of that looks at a single state or another country and asks whether legalization changed behavior, not what everyday life with legal cannabis actually feels like.<sup>9</sup>

Qualitative accounts (the kind that ask people to describe their experiences in their own words), are much rarer, especially from ordinary consumers with limited ties to industry or advocacy, and almost none span several established adult-use markets at once. The people most affected by these markets – the consumers who buy and use cannabis – are rarely the ones heard from in policy debates.

As such, this study addresses that gap in our knowledge by centering the voices of everyday consumers and seeks to understand the perspectives and lived experiences of residents in states where adult-use cannabis has been legal for at least five years.

# METHODOLOGY

From February to April 2026, the study team conducted 37 semi-structured 45-60 minute interviews over Zoom with adults living in states where AU cannabis has been legally sold for at least five years, to understand their experiences with and opinions on legal cannabis in their communities.

## Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were eligible to participate in interviews if they:

- Were age 21 or older
- Lived in one of nine states where adult-use cannabis had been legally sold for at least five years at the time of data collection, which included: Alaska, California, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington.
- Had lived in their current state for at least six months
- Had purchased adult-use cannabis at least once in the past year, or had a close friend or family member who had

Participants were recruited through state and community subreddits such as r/anchorage, r/Detroit, and r/Marijuana, as well as outreach to community organizations and health centers, and referrals from participants to others in their networks. Interested people completed a short screening survey, and those who met the eligibility criteria were interviewed for 45 to 60 minutes over Zoom. Interviews were recorded with cameras off to protect anonymity, and each participant received a \$50 gift card to thank them for their time. At the start of each interview, a team member reviewed and confirmed the participant's signed consent form. After the interview, a short follow-up

survey collected demographic information, including age, gender, race and ethnicity, state of residence, political affiliation, and cannabis use preferences. By combining multiple recruitment strategies and posting across diverse subreddits, the study team aimed to ensure the sample included a wide range of cannabis consumers. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide of 19 questions. The interviewer prompted and guided each conversation, asked follow-up questions, and let people expand on what mattered most to them, while still making sure the core topics were covered. The guide opened broadly, asking how people thought legalization was going in their state and whether their views had changed over time, before moving to more specific topics. Later questions asked directly about the positive and negative aspects of legalization, federal legalization, tax revenue, and the war on drugs, and closed by asking what people would change if they could.

This report focuses on people's opinions of legalization overall and the changes they want to see. A forthcoming report will explore questions about dispensary visits, advertising, and buying habits in more depth.

## Data Analysis

The study team analyzed the interviews using a process called coding. Once an interview was transcribed, the team read through it and attached thematic labels to what participants said, capturing the underlying idea of each passage so that related points could be grouped and

compared across interviews. Coding the full set of 37 interviews let the team see which themes recurred across many participants, which ones appeared rarely, and how those themes related to one another.

To keep the coding consistent, two team members independently coded the same interview excerpts and then compared how they had labeled each passage. Their level of agreement was measured with Cohen’s kappa, a standard statistic for how often two coders assign the same label beyond what chance alone would produce. The team reached a kappa above 0.93, which indicates almost perfect agreement, and then resolved any remaining differences before coding the rest of the interviews.

The study team also used a concept called saturation to decide when enough interviews had been conducted. Saturation is reached when participants stop raising new themes and when each additional interview surfaces the same concerns and experiences already heard rather than introducing something new. Reaching saturation is what allows a qualitative study to speak to broadly shared experiences rather than a handful of individual opinions. By the time interviews ended in April 2026, participants in different states and with very different backgrounds were converging on the same core themes, which gave the study team confidence that the interviews had captured the main range of perspectives among the consumers it set out to understand.<sup>10,11</sup>

### Positionality

The research team included Faith English and Meredith McGee. Faith English is a white, cisgender, bisexual woman who holds a doctoral degree in public health. She has personal lived experience with cannabis and other substance use as well as a professional background working with historically marginalized communities, including teen parents, individuals experiencing co-occurring mental illness, substance use, and homelessness, and individuals living with HIV. Meredith McGee is a white, cisgender, queer lesbian who holds a master’s degree in public health. She is disabled and lives with chronic pain, is neurodivergent, and uses cannabis daily as part of managing her condition. She previously worked as a budtender in the legal cannabis industry, giving her direct familiarity with cannabis as both medicine and consumer product and with the retail side of the legal market. The research team acknowledges that their status as white women may limit the analysis, and that their lived experiences may not match those of the historically marginalized communities of color most affected by cannabis prohibition. To address the team’s power and privilege, coders reflected on their own biases and discussed them in coding meetings. This analysis is framed around an awareness of the racist legacy of cannabis prohibition in the United States, including the racialized

policing and disproportionate arrest and incarceration of Black and Latinx people, and the ways cannabis policy reform remains limited by structural racism today.

### Study Sample

The sample included a minimum of two participants from each of the nine states in the U.S. that have had at least five years or more of active sales of AU cannabis. The sample largely mirrors national Census data by race and ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> Participants identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, white, and multiracial are slightly overrepresented, while Black or African American and Latinx participants are slightly underrepresented. The percentage of Asian participants is nearly identical to national data. Additionally, the sample included a range of participants across age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and cannabis use patterns. The sample is underrepresented by people who identified as conservative; the majority of participants self-identified as liberal or somewhat liberal, while a minority of participants identified as moderate. Overall, the sample captures a wide enough range of experiences to highlight the themes that matter most to people in these markets. See Table 1 and Figures 1-3 for additional details about the study sample.

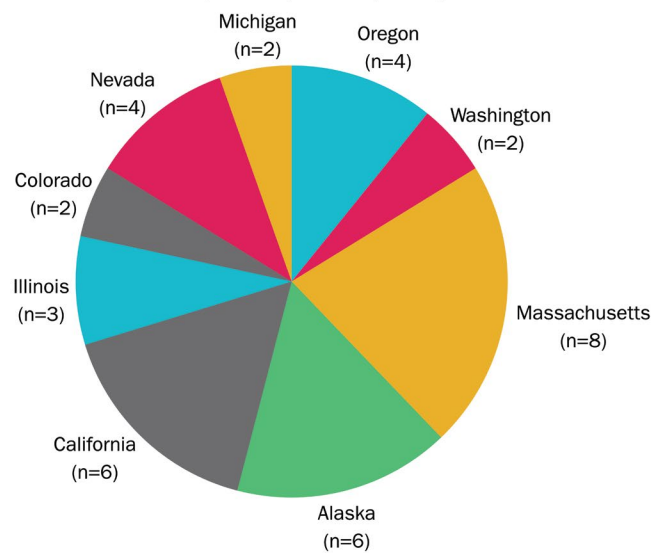
**TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

| CHARACTERISTIC                   | NUMBER | PERCENT |
|----------------------------------|--------|---------|
| <b>Race</b>                      |        |         |
| American Indian/Alaska Native    | 2      | 5%      |
| Asian                            | 2      | 5%      |
| Black or African American        | 2      | 5%      |
| White                            | 24     | 65%     |
| Two or more races                | 4      | 11%     |
| Prefer not to answer/no response | 3      | 8%      |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>                 |        |         |
| Latinx                           | 3      | 8%      |
| Non-Latinx                       | 34     | 92%     |
| <b>Age</b>                       |        |         |
| 21-30                            | 13     | 35%     |
| 31-50                            | 17     | 46%     |
| 51+                              | 7      | 19%     |
| <b>Gender Identity*</b>          |        |         |
| Man                              | 19     | 52%     |
| Woman                            | 15     | 40%     |
| Nonbinary                        | 3      | 8%      |
| Trans man                        | 1      | 3%      |
| Trans woman                      | 1      | 3%      |
| Genderqueer                      | 1      | 3%      |
| Gender nonconforming             | 1      | 3%      |
| <b>Sexual Identity*</b>          |        |         |
| Heterosexual/straight            | 21     | 56%     |
| Bisexual                         | 7      | 19%     |
| Pansexual                        | 6      | 16%     |
| Asexual                          | 3      | 8%      |
| Gay                              | 3      | 8%      |
| Queer                            | 3      | 8%      |
| Lesbian                          | 2      | 5%      |
| Prefer not to answer             | 1      | 2%      |

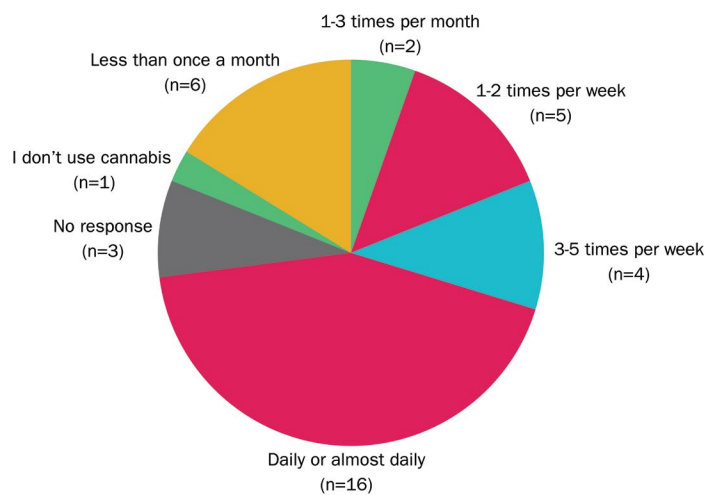
\*Note: Participants could select all that apply, so categories are not mutually exclusive and percentages sum to more than 100

# FINDINGS

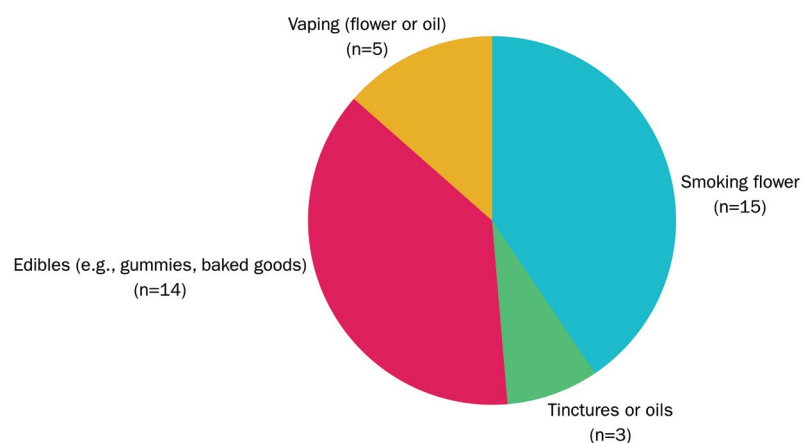
**FIGURE 1: PARTICIPANTS BY STATE (N=37)**



**FIGURE 2: PATTERNS OF CANNABIS USE (N=37)**



**FIGURE 3: PREFERRED CONSUMPTION METHOD (N=37)**



## Impressions of AU legalization

The findings are presented in three thematic segments in which we distill participant impressions of AU legalization, including (1) what they see as its benefits, (2) its downsides, and (3) the changes they hope to see as the policy continues to evolve. Note that many of their impressions may not be supported by scientific evidence; our goal was to capture the everyday opinions and perceptions of people with firsthand experience in established cannabis markets. Below are the primary themes that emerged.

### POSITIVE IMPACTS OF LEGALIZATION

Participants shared their opinions about the positive aspects of AU legalization, including:

- Reductions in arrests and incarceration for cannabis-related offenses
- Decreased stigma and increased normalization of cannabis use
- Increased safety and harm reduction
- Economic revitalization
- Increased access to both medical and AU dispensaries offering a wide variety of high-quality cannabis products

### Reduction in arrest and incarceration

About half of participants perceived that people are no longer being arrested and incarcerated for cannabis, which they described as a significant benefit of AU legalization. Specifically, one participant from Massachusetts spoke to the racist legacy of cannabis prohibition and the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of people of color for cannabis-related offenses:

*It feels like it disproportionately affects minorities in a way because it's like, you know, you'll get a slap on the wrist if you're sort of privileged, but then you, like, actually get jail if you're not. And I think that's really fucked up. So I think that's a great thing about legalization.*

Participants spoke to the harms of cannabis prohibition and that involvement with the criminal justice system for cannabis-related offenses often had long-term impacts on people's lives, as another participant from Massachusetts described:

*I think the overwhelming fact about legalization is this – that no one's being arrested for marijuana anymore... we're not wrecking people's lives, we're not kicking them out of schools, we're not taking away child custody, and all those horrible things that occurred under prohibition, they have stopped. And I think all of us are much better off for that fact.*

### Decreased stigma and increased normalization of cannabis use

A perceived reduction in stigma about recreational and medical cannabis use was highlighted as an important and positive impact of AU legalization. Participants described a sense that cannabis has become normalized across their state and in their communities. As one participant from Nevada described, "I've seen a lot more people talking about it openly, talking about when it becomes like an addiction or a problem to use cannabis, which I think legalization has promoted that safety and being able to talk about it, since it no longer carries that legal risk for us."

Participants also spoke to the ways in which the normalization of cannabis use has contributed to an

expanded sense of community. One participant from Michigan spoke to how legalization has facilitated a sense of shared experience across social groups:

*When you go into a dispensary, especially here in [city], like, any given day, you're probably gonna see an elderly Black person, an elderly white person, some people in their thirties. It's a very diverse experience. And so it's a good reminder of, you know, this is a very universal thing that people across all walks of life like to use, which is, I think really something good for people to understand and realize.*

There was also a sense that the increased normalization and social acceptance of AU legalization has facilitated more open dialogue about cannabis use, as one participant from Michigan described, "I

mean, maybe making it legal, maybe that promotes more conversation about it in a constructive way because, you know, we're a long way from the days of the Reefer Madness movie."

*“ And I think it's also, you know, it's becoming a lot more normalized...and now it's like, hey, it could be your kid's soccer coach, or the preschool teacher, or whatever, the same way that they might enjoy a glass of wine at the end of the day, they might enjoy some cannabis. ”*

## Increased safety and harm reduction

Many participants described a perception of increased safety, in particular having access to high-quality, regulated cannabis that has been tested for contaminants and potency. Participants drew parallels between the regulated market and their prior experiences with purchasing cannabis from the illicit market. Specifically, they described feeling much more confident that cannabis purchased from dispensaries is much safer than what is or was available from the illicit market. As one participant from Colorado expressed:

***I used to purchase from elsewhere, and there was, like, an element of risk to that sometimes. I like that you can just go into a shop and purchase it like you would with alcohol. It's very safe. I know that it's not gonna be laced with anything. So, I think that's the expectation you should have when you go to purchase cannabis.***

Another participant from Massachusetts described, "Like, it removes uncertainty from having to just, yeah, buy [from] someone that you don't really know. And, the process, it feels a little bit more structured and safer."

Similarly, a participant from Oregon made a similar connection between AU legalization and a safe cannabis supply for consumers:

***I feel confident going into a licensed dispensary and purchasing cannabis. I'm confident that it's not adulterated with other things and I'm neither buying oregano for incredibly jacked up prices or something powerfully strong that's been laced with LSD or some other chemical that shouldn't be in there.***

The importance of safety was echoed by another participant from Oregon who expressed an appreciation for being able to purchase cannabis in a safe and legal dispensary rather than from the illicit market, "So I [like] not having to go behind the dumpster at a Taco Bell to try to score some weed, but instead go to a nice, you know, establishment and buy it all legally."

Further, participants expressed appreciation for the labeling of the cannabinoid profile of products sold in dispensaries which is in stark contrast to purchasing cannabis from the illicit market where this information is rarely available to consumers. One participant from Illinois described, "And it is convenient knowing the strength of it because if you buy something off the street, you don't know how strong or quality it's gonna be. If you're buying it in the store, it's supposed to be a certain quality to it as well."

## Economic revitalization

Many participants also underscored the economic benefits they have observed from AU legalization in their state, including revitalizing the local economy, dispensaries moving into vacant storefronts, and jobs coming to the community. As one participant from Illinois described:

***The dispensaries - they built one brand new. So it was a brand new property. So the undeveloped land became developed land, and then it was taxable. And the other property was one they refurbished. So they took an empty building that no one was using and were able to refurbish it and make it nice again, and now it has business there again.***

Some participants highlighted how the AU cannabis industry brought jobs to their communities and created pathways for people who were previously employed in the illicit market. Another participant from Alaska made a similar observation, "And so I think on that level, legalizing cannabis made an opportunity for, you know, people who never thought that skill would come in handy."

The cannabis industry was also described as being a viable career option for people in their communities. As one participant from Colorado said, "I know personally that many people I know in the industry make more money than they would in other industries, and it's better for them. So that's, I think, that's a benefit for an economy as well for, like, people in it to be making a living wage."

## Access to cannabis has increased

Speaking to their personal experiences with and opinions about AU legalization, some participants identified increased access to cannabis as an overwhelmingly positive outcome.

One participant from Alaska summarized, "The expectation when things were legalized was that there would be access to purchase cannabis and a variety of products and different ways to consume it, and all of that has been met." Another participant from Colorado described expanded access in terms of diversification of the retail experience, "We also have delivery. We now have consumption lounges, so I feel like the program is, like, continuing to expand."

Participants also described how increased access has led to a greater variety of products available to consumers. For example, one participant from Oregon stated:

***Since it was legalized for wider use, a lot of little shops have popped up, and there's enough out there that there's healthy competition amongst them. And each shop has different inventories from different vendors. So you can go around and find what works for you when the prices are reasonable.***

Similarly, another participant from Washington described how increased access and competition in the marketplace has led to a higher quality cannabis supply for consumers:

***I am seeing more competition from both the retail shops and the kind of atmosphere that they offer for the consumers. I'm seeing more competition for the different strains and even the variety in the marketing and formulation of the edibles or other infused oils and I think that's it's really fun for someone who likes f<sup>o</sup>d and flavor to also have a choice in the way that it's [cannabis] delivered, and not just the flower.***

## **Access to medical cannabis has expanded under AU legalization**

Although we did not explicitly ask participants about the relationship between AU legalization and medical cannabis use, many participants highlighted how AU legalization has contributed to increased access to cannabis for medical purposes. Specifically, one participant from Alaska explained, "Like, I have a lot of injuries. Like, I'm currently healing up from a broken ankle right now. So, I went and picked up some very high CBD capsules."

Another participant from California spoke to how AU legalization has helped to destigmatize medical cannabis use among populations who may not previously have been willing to try it:

***My grandmother uses a CBD, and I think that previously she would have scoffed at the idea. So when it was kinda defined that, like, CBDs can have good health benefits, I think that she was interested in taking that for her***

***ailments. And, yeah, I think that is that's kind of was it the legality or the legal status of cannabis sort of helped or changed that.***

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Similarly, a participant from California stated, "So, you know, I think it's opened people's eyes to the potential use cases for it, the legitimate use cases for it, whether it's recreational or medicinal."

Another participant from Oregon described how much easier it is to access AU cannabis in comparison to navigating the formal process of becoming a medical patient, "It's allowed access to means of dealing with pain or sleeplessness that were not available unless you went through your doctor. And even then, with insurance and everything, what they could provide for you was not optimal."

One participant from Michigan described letting their medical card lapse simply because it was easier to purchase cannabis from AU dispensaries:

***I had a medical card. It lapsed last December. I've chosen not to renew it at this time, primarily because the recreational market has matured to the point where there almost are no dispensaries that differentiate***

***between medical or recreational. And it used to be that if you had a med card, they would knock off, you know, 10% in taxes. Less places are doing that and it was just a matter of – I don't have the time right now to get in to see the doctor, to get the renewal form.***

## NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF LEGALIZATION

Participants shared their opinions about the limitations of AU legalization in their state:

- AU cannabis is overregulated
- Tax revenue is not being invested in their communities as originally promised
- Concerns about problematic use and underage cannabis use
- Concern about the increased presence of cannabis use in public spaces

### Cannabis is overregulated

A common point of criticism shared by participants was the perceived overregulation of AU legalization. Overregulation was described as a contributor to delays in implementation, posing significant barriers to small business owners, and related to an overall decline in cannabis quality due to an inability for high-quality producers to comply with unnecessarily strict rules. As one participant from Massachusetts described:

***There's tons of regulation changes constantly, like, just in terms of what packaging needs to look like, what, you know, labels have to be...and I know it's to a detriment of, you know, the smaller businesses that are trying to use this as their livelihood, are constantly having to pivot and eat costs, throw product away because it's in the wrong quote-unquote packaging or the label is different than what, you know, the [governing body] has now ruled that they need to be marketed as.***

Similarly, another participant from Nevada stated, "But we wanted to reinvent the wheel again with cannabis and take things slow, and it seems to have concentrated, the businesses in the hands of a few corporations instead of individual owners that are local."

One participant from California made a connection between the obstacles in place for individuals seeking to gain access to the AU cannabis industry:

***But, but beyond that, I feel like it should let the market handle the rest. So in particular, there's just so many rules, so much red tape around starting a dispensary, getting a license. It's every jurisdiction has its own thing. You know, it's not like if you wanna sell lettuce, you don't have to, like, petition the government to give you a lettuce selling license.***

Observations about an overall decline in cannabis quality and the role of overregulation were outlined by one participant from California, "But what I do know is that the way that [county] has done the legalization process and all the fees that farmers have to go through, it has destroyed probably the best cannabis farmers."

Some participants had a perception that the legacy of cannabis prohibition and the history of cannabis being portrayed as a dangerous drug has played a role in the overregulation of AU cannabis. As one participant from Oregon described, "And that we have a lot of, you know,

people who aren't really looking at science or data, and are just making decisions based on, well, this is something that's been under prohibition for so long, let's make sure that we really keep the screws tight on this."

### Tax revenue is not being used as promised

While many participants described economic revitalization via new businesses opening in their communities, there was a common sentiment among participants that tax revenue from the cannabis industry was not being reinvested in their communities in the ways initially promised. A participant living in Oregon described:

***“And, I mean, right now here in the city, they're talking about closing down schools. So it's like, where is the tax money that was supposed to be going towards the schools and public infrastructure and all that way?”***

***I think the taxes that are being, you know, taken out by the state government, those are not being used the way that we were all promised they would be used. They, in a lot of cases – the money is still just sitting in large funds, without being used for, you know, all the different addiction programs and awareness programs and money to repair our roads.***

Another participant from Nevada had a similar perspective on tax revenue:

***Part of the promise of legalization of cannabis was the tax or the revenue it was going to bring back into the economy and what that was going to be used for. I think that's the part that's kind of fallen – it's not necessarily being [used] as promised. I don't feel like it's revitalized the economy the way it was proposed when it was getting legalized.***

A participant from Colorado expressed, "I do worry how that money is allocated. I don't trust, you know, the people in power to use all of that money the way they promise. But I don't personally see or know for a matter of fact exactly how that money is allocated."

Similarly, another participant from Alaska expressed frustration with the economic challenges faced by their community. The participant expressed disappointment that tax revenue from the cannabis industry was not making a noticeable difference as it was initially promised to do: “And, I mean, right now here in the city, they’re talking about closing down schools. So it’s like, where is the tax money that was supposed to be going towards the schools and public infrastructure and all that way?”

## Concern about problematic cannabis use

There was a concern among participants that legalization has contributed to increases in problematic cannabis use.

Participants described the possible over-normalization of cannabis in which people perceive cannabis use as being harmless, concerns about the potency of cannabis available in dispensaries, and potential negative impacts on mental health. As a participant from Nevada described:

***Definitely with increased access, there’s going to be more increased risky use of it... So that’s also a concern, which isn’t related to the legalization, because these concerns already existed. But with increased access, I think those concerns become a little bit more relevant, and I don’t think we’ve done enough to talk about those risks enough in the process of legalization.***

Another participant from Massachusetts spoke to perceived harmlessness of cannabis as being potentially related to increases in problematic use:

***I mean, as I mentioned, it’s so easy to get that it’s very much normalized now. And people I do think often, like, it’s a drug, like any other... So I think the more easy something is to get, the easier it is to exploit in that way. And I think because cannabis has the reputation of being just like a chill, good time drug, people don’t think that you can get addicted to it. But I definitely have friends that are addicted to it, because I know various people that are high all the time. And I think that that can’t be good for you long term. But then if you talk to them, they’re like, “oh, it’s just a little weed. You know?” And I’m like, “No. It’s just a lot of weed. I don’t know you sober, bro. Like, that’s weird”.***

Many participants described the increase in high potency products available in dispensaries. Participants expressed concern that without adequate education around dosage, some consumers run the risk of taking too much. One participant from Nevada described:

***I think they communicate, like, how much THC is in a gram or whatever, but I don’t think that means anything to anyone until they do it... I mean, I think it happened to a lot of people when it first went legal. They went back after not doing it for twenty, thirty years, and they’re like, “oh my god.”***

Similarly, another participant from Illinois described their experience taking an edible, “I’ve had, negative experiences with marijuana as well, though I’ve also had positive. I mean, the first time I ever took an edible, I had to go to the hospital because there wasn’t good education about, like, what I was taking and how much I was taking.”

***“It’s like these flavors that are really sickly sweet and the vapes and the pre rolls and all that. I just feel like they’re targeting kids.”***

Participants also expressed concern about the ways in which cannabis use can exacerbate mental health challenges, as one person from Illinois shared their experience:

***The last couple years have been particularly rough, and marijuana started aggravating, like [my] psychosis. And so, like, there needs to be education around, like, you know, how much are you taking, how that’s gonna affect your body so that you can make informed***

***choices about how much you’re buying as a beginner versus a veteran marijuana user. Because there isn’t a there isn’t a good distinction around those things.***

The relationship between regular, consistent access to cannabis and the financial burden participants are experiencing was articulated by one participant from Michigan, “I spend a lot more money. I have another family member who, because of my age, I don’t go out much. And so I have a family member who stocks me up a lot, and so I think that my consumption has certainly increased.”

## Concern about increased youth use

Many participants expressed a concern that AU legalization could contribute to increases in underage use. One participant from Massachusetts described:

***My only concern about the legalization is if it makes things more available for teenagers. I mean – it’s one of those things where they’ve been smoking weed since the beginning of time and they’ll probably continue to do that. And I don’t, you know, if they really wanted it, they’d find a way to get it regardless of whether or not it was legal. I do worry a little bit about it being more easily accessible to them and less detectable with things like gummies, because, you know, just in terms of brain development, and there’s limited research on cannabis, but I believe that there are indicators that before the frontal prefrontal cortex is fully developed it can be a risk to brain development.***

Another participant from Nevada expressed concern about some of the cannabis products available at dispensaries as being particularly appealing to underage people, “It’s like these flavors that are really sickly sweet and the vapes and the pre rolls and all that. I just feel like they’re targeting kids.”

One participant from Washington expressed concern that AU legalization could lead to increased access among underage people; the same participant also expressed hope that along with legalization, there has been an increase in open and honest conversations between parents and children about the risks of cannabis use during adolescence:

***And so when it’s more accessible to the layperson in a legal way, it’s also more accessible to people who are underage and whose developing brains may be impacted by using these products. And I don’t know how often parents are having conversations because I’m not a parent myself and I’m hoping they’re having the similar conversations with their children...and that is where I can see the negatives is, you know, the people who are not at a legal age to use and they’re not getting sufficient education about it along with other substances such as alcohol.***

## Concern about the increased presence of cannabis in public spaces

One concern raised by about a third of the sample was the increased presence of cannabis in public spaces since legalization, most often through its smell. Participants generally described this as a mild irritation rather than a serious harm. As one participant from Oregon described, “Public pot use has definitely become more prevalent. Downtown [city] in the summer, if you’re walking through every couple blocks, you’ll smell it.”

For some, this presence was most noticeable in cars and on the road. A participant from Massachusetts described seeing and smelling cannabis use among people driving, “You see and smell people smoking while they’re driving way more frequently than you used to, which, you know, it’s not the same kind of intoxication, but it’s still intoxication, and that that still worries me.”

Another participant from Alaska noted the smell around dispensaries and cultivation sites, “Even just driving around town and you pass some of the bigger shops or the shops that maybe do grow, you’re just kinda smelling it for a while.”

A smaller number of participants pointed to litter as a visible byproduct of legal cannabis use, though they often

treated the problem as trivial. One participant from Oregon connected it to ordinary retail activity, “There’s gonna be some trash. There’s people who have the little plastic containers for joints, or for flower. You see trash, but outside of a little bit of litter, I don’t really see [a] negative impact.” Another participant from Oregon was more bothered, describing, “A lot of garbage now associated” with cannabis use and stated a personal sensitivity to “people throwing things away.”

Notably, several participants who raised the smell and litter of public use went out of their way to minimize it, framing these as aesthetic features of a normalizing market rather than significant harms.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Participants identified concrete, actionable recommendations for ways that their state’s legalization policies could be improved:

- Greater transparency around policymaking and use of cannabis tax revenue
- Increased constituent involvement in policy implementation
- Policy reforms to protect the long-term success of small businesses
- Physical spaces for consumers to legally use cannabis
- Federal legalization of AU cannabis

**“Even just driving around town and you pass some of the bigger shops or the shops that maybe do grow, you’re just kinda smelling it for a while.”**

## Policymakers need to be more transparent and provide opportunities for constituent involvement

A common recommendation across participants was for cannabis policies and policymakers to be more transparent, specifically about how decisions are being made and why; where tax revenue is going; and to provide opportunities for constituents to participate in this process. One participant from Oregon described:

***I’d probably like to see a proper, objective, regulatory board, council, whatever you want to call it, put in place with appropriate checks and balances and input from constituency. And not just sort of creating things in a vacuum and ruling with an iron fist. I’d like to see more, you know, actual community involvement, state involvement, voter involvement.***

Many participants called for more consistent and transparent communication from state policymakers around how cannabis tax revenue is being used. As one participant from California articulated:

***What I'm less clear on is exactly where that revenue goes. That's what I'm very interested in is to know, like, specifically what's happening with that. I don't think that the state has done a great job of saying, like, "we're pulling in all this tax revenue, and it's being used for x, y, and z." I think they should do a better job of that because that is really kind of the main impetus that I had in supporting legalization.***

Similarly, a participant from Oregon echoed a desire for more transparency, "Our local politicians aren't putting up signs saying 'this park is brought to you by marijuana money.' Maybe they should." Participants also expressed a desire for more community-based decision making around how cannabis tax revenue is being used. As one participant from Nevada described:

***I would love there to be support for . . . using some of the tax dollars to have systems in place to help people who are recovering from other substances or who are wanting to become involved with the process of designating where these tax dollars go and investing in community rehabilitation programs.***

Similarly, a participant from Nevada articulated, "We [should] allow small business owners, mom and pop shops,

easy on-ramps to be able to meet the license requirements and participate in the legal market." Another participant from California echoed a similar sentiment: "I think this is a thread that I've pulled all the way through this, which is support for small batch farmers. Sustainable farming, biodynamic farming, support for that, for the upliftment of that and higher taxes for larger farmers and larger dispensaries."

One participant from Alaska described, "One thing I would do would be to not let out-of-state interests profit from Alaska's cannabis users."

This theme was echoed by a participant from Michigan:

***So, you know, what I don't wanna see is a situation where Philip Morris realizes that, you know, there's so much money in cannabis and not tobacco. And then you have a situation where senators are more easily able to take campaign donations to tailor the laws to those giant corporations. Like, that's a huge concern that I and a lot of cannabis smokers in Michigan share.***

***“It's a little bit of a strange, you know, of course you can buy this marijuana, but unless you own a home, there's nowhere legally in the state, you're allowed to use it. You can't use it in your apartment. You can't use it in your car. You can't use it in a bar. You can't use it in a park. So where are all these people meant to be using their cannabis?”***

## **Policies need to protect small businesses**

Many participants expressed a desire for reforms of AU legalization to provide more support to ensure long-term success of small business owners and incorporate protections against multi-state operators from dominating the cannabis market. A participant from Colorado described, "I think that we should create programs that's more support [for] small businesses and like, the idea that regulations should support all different types of small businesses, I think, has very much changed my perspective on how we legalize cannabis."

## States need to allow for legal venues for public cannabis consumption

Public consumption of cannabis was mentioned as being relatively common, and participants expressed a desire for safe and legal places for cannabis to be used publicly without fear of criminal justice system involvement. Another participant from Massachusetts stated:

*You know, having a music venue where people can bring marijuana or buy marijuana and smoke at their or lounges. And I sort of feel a little whether or not I actually wanna use these things, it's more businesses and it's like, we have empty storefronts. What if there's a little smokey lounge or something like that? It's like, make that easier and make it cheaper for a regular person to legally and safely get into this market. You know, if you're gonna open a bar, why can't you open a hookah bar?*

Similarly, another participant from Michigan described the appeal of venues where public cannabis consumption is legal, "Prior to legalization, like, you're not having social activities based around cannabis. At least not in public. And as someone who doesn't drink alcohol at all, I think that's a cool experience and a cool thing."

## Legalize AU cannabis federally

A majority of participants supported legalizing AU cannabis at the federal level, though agreement was not universal. About a third had mixed feelings, and two participants opposed a federal role in regulating cannabis. Those two still supported legalization in their own states, and their objection reflected distrust of the federal government rather than opposition to cannabis. Among supporters, many felt that states should be empowered to design and implement their own policies.

*Then also this reflects that a lot of the policies that we have on a national level about cannabis relate to a lot of racial oppression and historically of trying to police communities of color . . . I think part of moving towards legalizing it on a national level is part of recovering from that history. With that also, would lead to, hopefully, lower policing of marginalized communities for reasons related to cannabis.*

Federal legalization was also framed as an opportunity to expand access to cannabis. One participant described how federal legalization would improve access to medical cannabis for veteran populations, stating, "There's you know, there are a ton of veterans in Alaska. I think it has one of the highest concentrations. I utilize the VA. A lot of people up there utilize the VA and still can't access certain treatments or utilize certain things."

**“ So, you know, what I don't wanna see is a situation where Philip Morris realizes that, you know, there's so much money in cannabis and not tobacco. And then you have a situation where senators are more easily able to take campaign donations to tailor the laws to those giant corporations. Like, that's a huge concern that I and a lot of cannabis smokers in Michigan share. ”**

Finally, many participants expressed a desire for more rigorous scientific research into the potential risks and benefits of cannabis use. They highlighted how federal legalization would streamline this process, as another participant from Alaska described:

*Federal legalization – it would honestly probably open the door for more research to be done. Like, locally we have a university where I live, and I work at that university. So I honestly can see a lot of people – like I have known some professors who did do classes on marijuana and stuff like that, but you can't really do any research on it because it is so heavily restricted.*

## Design policy for the full range of consumer experiences

Throughout these interviews, we found that personal identity often shaped what people valued about legalization and what they worried about. The clearest patterns ran along racial and ethnic lines. Participants of color most often named the end of arrests and

incarceration as a defining benefit, and they were among the least likely to raise the business-side frustrations of overregulation and the squeezing out of small growers, which dominated among white participants. They were also the most likely to raise concerns about youth access and public health, and to question whether promised tax revenue was actually reaching their communities. LGBTQ+ participants were the most supportive of federal legalization and the most likely to describe cannabis in medical terms.

While these are qualitative patterns from a small sample rather than statistical findings, they point to something policy can't afford to overlook: There is no single consumer experience of legal cannabis.

# CONCLUSION

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Through 37 interviews, this study explored consumer perceptions of and opinions about AU cannabis legalization from individuals who live in states that have had at least five years of active cannabis sales. Overall, participants in the study were supportive of AU legalization and identified many ways in which they perceived this policy to have had a positive impact on their lives, their communities, and their state. Participant support for AU legalization was broad across the study sample. Participants offered valuable insights into the limitations of this policy, and they offered concrete feedback on ways it could be improved both in their states and nationwide.

While some of the perceived benefits and limitations of AU legalization described by participants is not supported by scientific research (e.g., there is little evidence of cannabis “laced” with LSD), this supports the overwhelming feedback from participants for clearer, more honest communication from the people making and studying these policies. Taken together, these accounts provide essential perspectives on the everyday experiences of people who live in states with established AU cannabis markets.

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