

# (UNCLEARED) AND CONFUSED

DRUG USE CONFUSION TRIPS  
UP YOUNG PEOPLE



There's no question that marijuana use is up. According to the National Institute of Health, the percentage of young people reporting past-year marijuana use has climbed by nearly 10% in the past five years alone. 21 states have now legalized recreational cannabis use, along with the District of Columbia. For many young people today, marijuana consumption in college is as ubiquitous as alcohol consumption, including in states with a strong aerospace and defense population, like Colorado and Arizona.

Conventions around marijuana use may have shifted, but federal laws haven't. That makes ongoing drug use an issue for security clearance applicants. And that leaves many wondering if the path to a national security career is going up in smoke for an increasing number of applicants.

ClearanceJobs and the Intelligence and National Security Foundation (INSF) – two organizations committed to the future of the national security workforce – sought to dig deeper and find out what drug issues are tripping up cleared candidates today. In a panel study, we looked at young people ages 18-30 and their understanding of marijuana use and security clearances, and whether or not drug prohibitions were keeping them from considering a national security career.

**THE REALITY:** Once they're informed of the government's drug policies, most young people report it won't prevent them from considering a job requiring a security clearance. The problem? Most young people have no idea what those policies are, and that abstaining from drug use is a requirement for a cleared career. When asked about having to report their drug use, one in five said the requirement to report drug use would keep them from applying for a national security position.

**IN THE MIDST OF A NATIONAL SECURITY HUMAN CAPITAL CRISIS, CAN WE AFFORD TO HAVE**



**ONE IN FIVE APPLICANTS**  
*-'puff'-* DISAPPEAR?

When initially asked if they would consider applying for a job requiring a security clearance, the vast majority were open to at least considering it.

**WOULD YOU CONSIDER APPLYING FOR A JOB THAT REQUIRES A SECURITY CLEARANCE TO ACCESS CLASSIFIED NATIONAL SECURITY INFORMATION?**

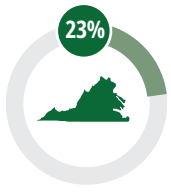


## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

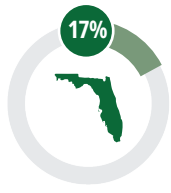
### KEY STATES



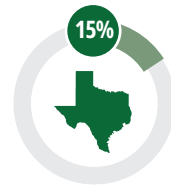
CALIFORNIA



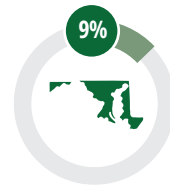
VIRGINIA



FLORIDA



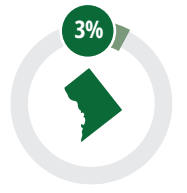
TEXAS



MARYLAND

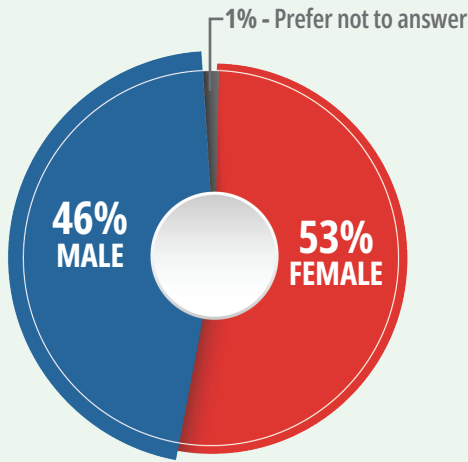


COLORADO

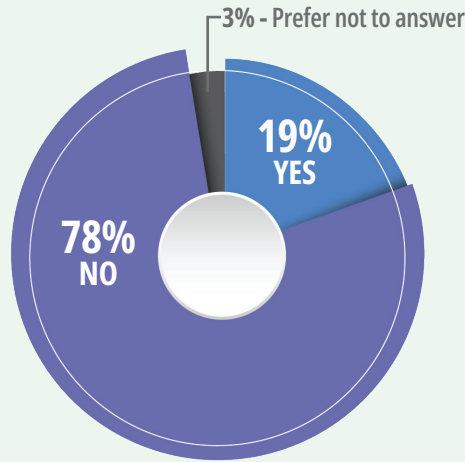


WASHINGTON, D.C.

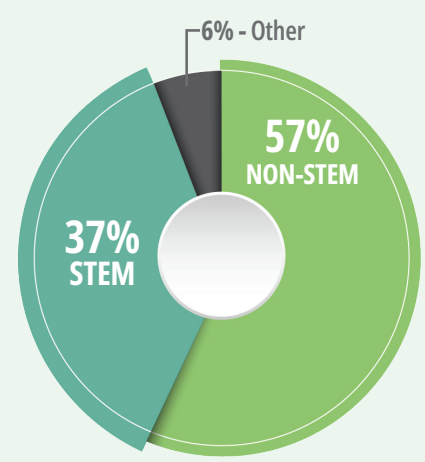
#### WHAT IS YOUR GENDER IDENTITY?



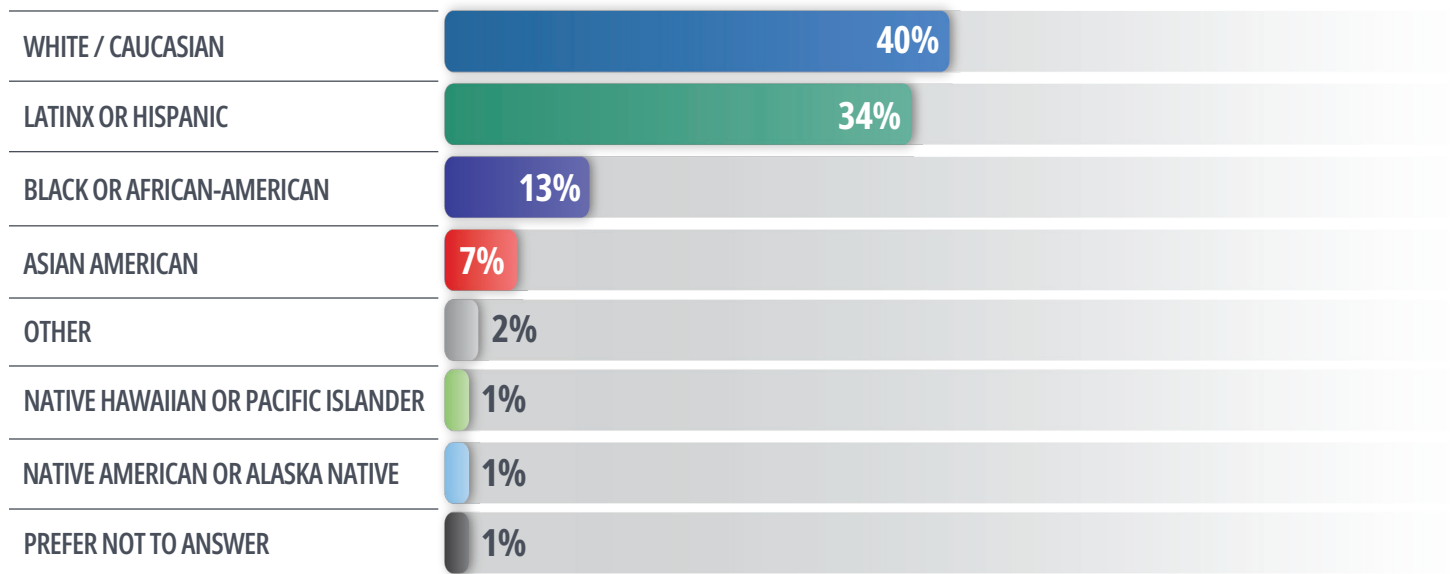
#### DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A MEMBER OF THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY?



#### FIELD OF STUDY FOR THOSE CURRENTLY PURSUING OR COMPLETED AN UNDERGRADUATE OR GRADUATE DEGREE



#### HOW WOULD YOU BEST DESCRIBE YOUR RACE/ETHNICITY?

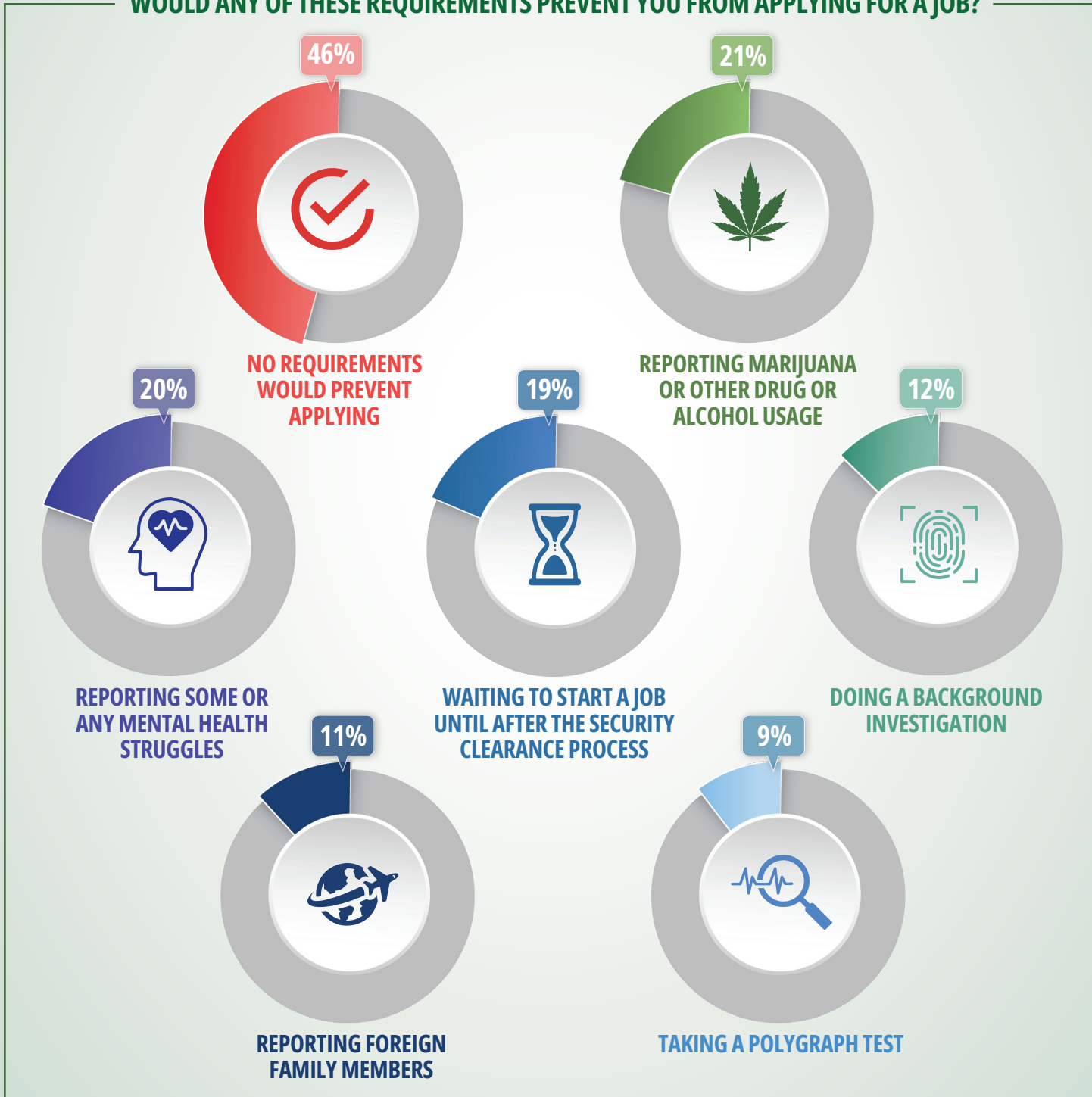


Demographic data did not impact results for the majority of respondents. The exception was for those who identified as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, who were 8% more likely to say that having to report their drug use would prevent them from pursuing a national security career.

Background investigations, polygraphs, and even foreign family members were less likely to cause concern for young people than having to report marijuana or drug use – marijuana was even more likely to be a reporting concern than mental health issues, in what is potentially a sign that the government’s efforts to destigmatize mental health issues is helping – but more effort is needed for both mental health and drug considerations.

It’s good that 46% of respondents cited no factors that would prevent them from obtaining a clearance. But bad news for a national security hiring community struggling to hire enough talent that more than half of respondents have at least one factor causing them to raise a red flag.

### WOULD ANY OF THESE REQUIREMENTS PREVENT YOU FROM APPLYING FOR A JOB?

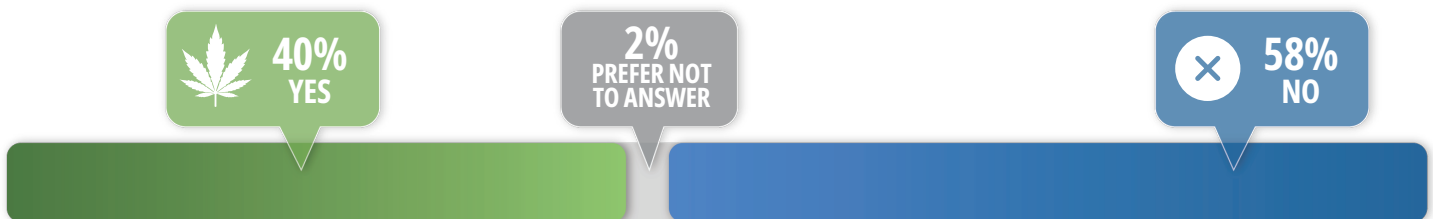


The wide range of marijuana products and derivatives create additional issues for security clearance holders and applicants. The government has urged caution around CBD products, which while not explicitly prohibited (other than by the DoD), can cause issues if your CBD creates a positive drug test. The other area of confusion concerns the 2018 Farm Bill and its legalization of hemp derivatives, specifically the Delta-8 strain of naturally derived THC.

Whether it's Delta 8, Delta 9, or a CBD product, if any of the above result in a positive drug test, security clearance holders will have issues.

The good news (perhaps) is that young people may be more aware of what they're consuming – and they're even more likely to have used marijuana in the past 12 months than any form of CBD (we'll say it's the lack of muscle aches).

### HAVE YOU USED MARIJUANA IN ANY FORM (SMOKED, VAPED, EDIBLES) WITHIN THE PAST 12 MONTHS?

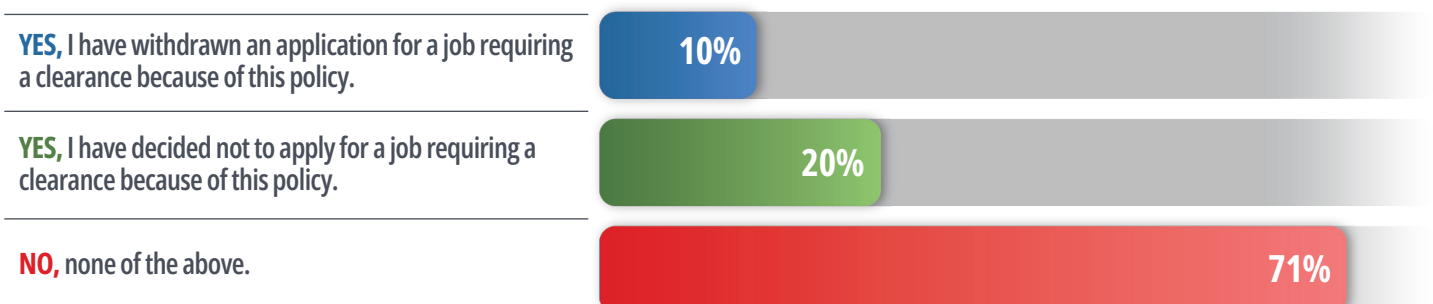


### HAVE YOU USED CANNABIDIOL (CBD) IN ANY FORM WITHIN THE PAST 12 MONTHS?



The majority of respondents said drug policies weren't keeping them from applying to government careers. Unfortunately, further questions in the panel demonstrated that may be because the vast majority of respondents had no clue what those policies were.

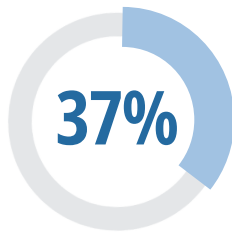
### HAVE YOU DECIDED NOT TO APPLY FOR A JOB REQUIRING A CLEARANCE, OR HAVE YOU WITHDRAWN SUCH AN APPLICATION, BECAUSE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY ON MARIJUANA USE FOR PEOPLE SEEKING CLEARANCES? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)



**WHAT IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S POLICY REGARDING THE IMPACT OF MARIJUANA USE ON ELIGIBILITY FOR A SECURITY CLEARANCE?**



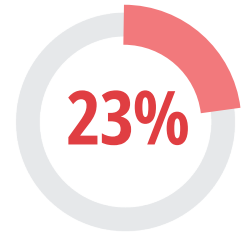
Use of marijuana automatically disqualifies someone from getting a security clearance.



Marijuana use does not impact one's eligibility for a security clearance.



Use of marijuana is one factor among many in determining whether one is eligible for a security clearance.



I don't know.

**WHAT IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S POLICY REGARDING WHERE APPLICANTS FOR A CLEARANCE MAY USE MARIJUANA?**

People seeking security clearances can use marijuana anywhere.



People seeking security clearances can use marijuana in states where it is legal to do so.



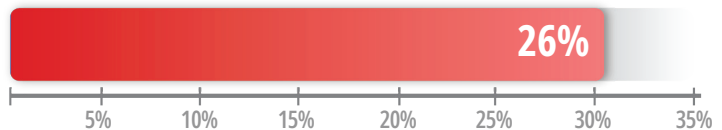
Use of marijuana, regardless of location, is one factor among many in determining whether one is eligible for a security clearance.



Use of marijuana anywhere automatically disqualifies someone from getting a security clearance.



I don't know.



**WHAT IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S POLICY REGARDING MARIJUANA USE FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE ALREADY BEEN GRANTED A SECURITY CLEARANCE?**

People holding security clearances can use marijuana anywhere.



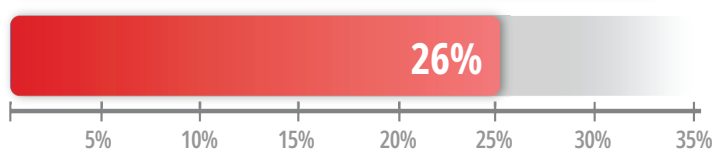
People holding security clearances can use marijuana but only in states where it is legal to do so.



People holding security clearances cannot use marijuana at all.



I don't know.



# MARIJUANA POLICY FOR CLEARANCE ELIGIBILITY

The majority of respondents both don't understand the government's policy for clearance applicants, or their policies for individuals who already have a security clearance.

And while it's good news is that once informed of those policies, only 25% said it would prevent them from seeking employment requiring a clearance – that means that one out of four respondents ages 18-30 – in the coveted demographic the government is looking to attract – are saying, 'thank you, next' when it comes to a job that requires them to *'just say no'* to marijuana.

**JUST 4%** of respondents were able to correctly identify the government's policy on marijuana use for both applicants and current clearance holders.

Once you've obtained a security clearance, you **may not use marijuana at all**, even in states where it's 'legal'

The state where marijuana was used is one factor among many for applicants applying for a security clearance.

## PRIOR TO APPLYING

Marijuana use is one factor among many in making a security clearance determination for a new applicant.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) sought to make drug policies a little less hazy with clarifying guidance issued in December 2021. The new policy makes it clear drug use – even very recent drug use – shouldn’t be a Scarlett Letter on your security clearance application. The clarifying guidance stated, “in light of the long-standing federal law and policy prohibiting illegal drug use while occupying a sensitive position or holding a security clearance, agencies are encouraged to advise prospective national security workforce employees that they should refrain from any future marijuana use upon initiation of the national security vetting process, which commences once the individual signs the certification contained in the Standard Form 86 (SF-86), Questionnaire for National Security Positions.”

The policy was significant because previously, the security clearance application process implied that drug use within a year of applying would be disqualifying. ODNI provided some reassurance for applicants with very recent drug use. But with most young people still completely unaware of that policy, the reality is that current drug prohibitions are likely weeding out many candidates.

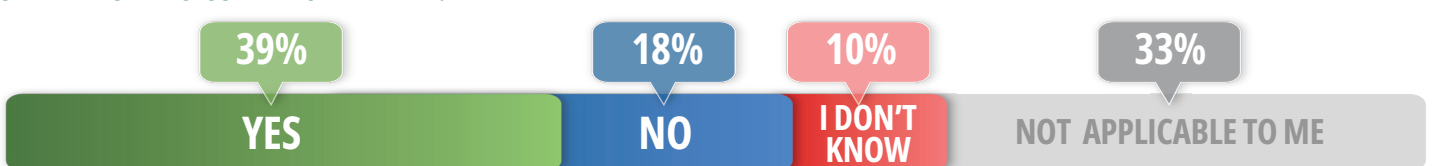
Another step toward making marijuana a less significant hurdle in a government career are changes to questions about drug use being made in the proposed update to the security clearance application, the Personnel Vetting Questionnaire (PVQ). The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released a draft of the new form in February, and will likely publish a final version in the next year. The PVQ is set to replace the SF-86 and other security clearance forms in the years to come, and for the first time it separates questions about marijuana from other drug use. While not the policy today, it’s one more step the government is taking to show marijuana isn’t the same as other drugs, given the number of states who have legalized it.

The other entity to weigh-in to eliminate some of the barriers between drug users and federal employment is Congress. The 2023 Intelligence Authorization Act prohibits security clearance denials based on pre-employment drug use. This reinforces the DNI’s existing policy for abstinence from the point of submitting a security clearance application. What it doesn’t do is change agency-specific suitability guidelines, which may still require a year of marijuana abstinence in some cases.

**WOULD THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S POLICY ON MARIJUANA USE PREVENT YOU FROM SEEKING EMPLOYMENT THAT REQUIRES A SECURITY CLEARANCE?**



**WOULD YOU STOP USING MARIJUANA TO INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD THAT YOU WOULD RECEIVE THE SECURITY CLEARANCE NECESSARY TO BE HIRED?**



**IF YOU RECEIVE A SECURITY CLEARANCE, WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO REFRAIN FROM MARIJUANA USE FOR AS LONG AS YOU ARE EMPLOYED IN A JOB THAT REQUIRES A CLEARANCE?**







## CURRENT DRUG POLICIES: WEEDING OUT TOO MANY CANDIDATES?

There are two key issues with current drug policies – the reality that one in five young people have no desire to pursue a government career with a marijuana ban, and the even greater number who are simply completely ignorant of the government’s drug policies – so much so that they are likely to weed themselves out of the process erroneously. The findings of the ClearanceJobs and INSF study support previous research by organizations such as RAND, who have cautioned that both increasing norms around marijuana use and confusion over the policies could be hampering the government’s ability to attract young talent.

*“The various state laws on marijuana use create opportunities for applicants to violate federal laws—either knowingly or unknowingly,” a RAND study released in 2020 cautioned. “These various laws may affect recruitment of young people by dissuading potential candidates from considering positions that require a security clearance. Specifically, some of these potential candidates may avoid applying for these positions under the belief that their legal marijuana use within one state may exclude them from holding a clearance under Guideline H (drug involvement and substance misuse).”*

In 2022, just 6% of the intelligence community workforce was under 20, and only 20% were under 40. National security has a massive need for more young people to enter the ranks – and while the survey showed many young people are still willing to pursue a national security career, losing one in five due to current drug policies – and even more to confusion about those policies – is keeping the government from attracting all of the talent it needs.

Barring a change in federal drug policy - which is up to Congress - the cleared community must work to continue to educate young people that past drug use will not negatively affect their ability to serve their country through military or government service.

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**METHODOLOGY:** The Clearance Jobs Marijuana and Clearances study was conducted in February of 2023 via commercially available panel sample. Eligible respondents were young professionals ages 18 to 30 who are US citizens, with at least a high school diploma (or equivalent) and currently living or attending school in Virginia, Maryland, D.C., California, Florida, Texas or Colorado (states were limited to ensure large enough sample sizes to look at data through a geographic lens). Data were weighted on age, race, and gender to ensure a stratified sample. A total of 905 respondents completed a survey, resulting in a margin of error of +/- 3.23%.



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