

# Exploring the Reasons for Cannabis Use among People Living with HIV: A Qualitative Analysis from CFAR Pilot Study Interviews

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## BACKGROUND

- People with HIV often face pain, anxiety, and depression—areas where cannabis may help.
- Cannabis is gaining attention as a potential alternative to opioids for pain management.

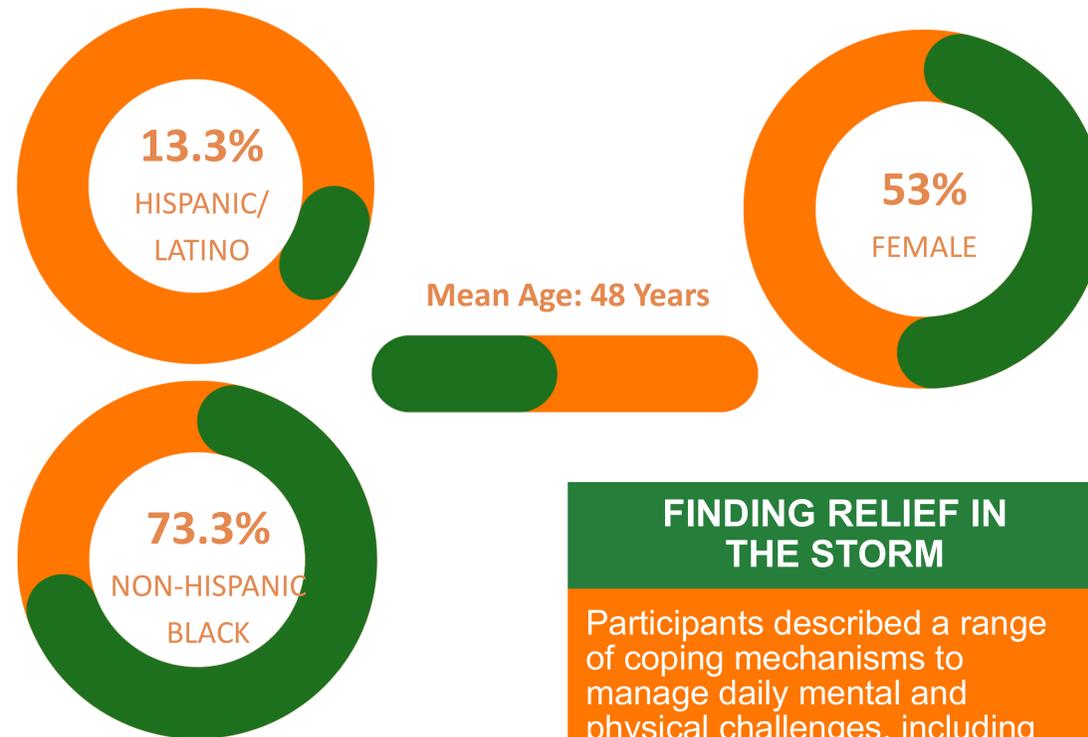
## OBJECTIVE

- This study aims to explore the preferences and motivations behind cannabis and opioid use in this population.

## METHODS

- Data are from a NIH/CFAR-funded administrative supplement study of cannabis consumers living with HIV and residing in South Florida
- Adults aged 18–65 with confirmed HIV diagnosis, undetectable viral loads, and cannabis consumers
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis guided by a codebook approach.
- Transcripts were imported and independently coded in NVivo 15 based on an agreed upon codebook.
- All codes and themes were generated based on team consensus.

## RESULTS



### FINDING RELIEF IN THE STORM

Participants described a range of coping mechanisms to manage daily mental and physical challenges, including physical activity, alcohol use, medication use, and frequently mentioned cannabis use. Cannabis was commonly used to cope with pain, stress, and anxiety, often perceived as more effective and less harmful than opioids.

### CHOOSING CANNABIS OVER ALTERNATIVES

Compared to opioids, cannabis was favored due to its perceived lower addiction risk, fewer side effects, and comfortability, despite opioids being medically considered more effective and accepted for severe pain.

### SOOTHING THE MIND & BODY

Interviews included the physical, mental, and emotional effects experienced when consuming cannabis. Participants reported that cannabis improved mood, induced relaxation, and increased appetite.

### TAILORING THE EXPERIENCE

Participants expressed preferences for cannabis sourced from dispensaries due to quality and legality but often relied on the black-market sources due to accessibility and cost.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Cannabis was commonly used to manage stress, pain, and anxiety, often viewed as safer and more effective than opioids.
- Participants reported mental, emotional, and physical benefits, including improved mood, relaxation, and increased appetite.
- Cannabis was preferred over opioids due to its lower addiction risk, fewer side effects, and greater personal comfort.
- Dispensary cannabis was favored for quality and legality, but cost and access often led participants to rely on black market sources.
- Cannabis use was part of a broader coping strategy, alongside physical activity, alcohol, and prescribed medications.
- Participants emphasized autonomy in managing their health, using cannabis as a self-directed alternative to traditional medical treatments.

## CONCLUSION

- Adults living with HIV in South Florida prefer cannabis over opioids for symptom management, citing fewer adverse effects and greater emotional and mental relief.
- This study highlights the need for healthcare providers to support informed treatment decisions and suggests avenues for future research, particularly in the context of evolving cannabis legislation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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