

The Legalization Juggernaut

Why won't more political leaders speak out on marijuana?

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The legalization of marijuana has acquired an aura of inevitability. But is there really no choice? Must Americans resign ourselves to the social acceptability, legal entrenchment, and widespread availability (including to our kids) of marijuana?

We are convinced this headlong rush into disaster can be stopped—if, that is, political leaders can be found who have the nerve to take on the conventional wisdom.

Currently, marijuana is legal in Colorado, and Washington state will soon debut its pot shops. Pew Research finds that pot is now legal in some form or decriminalized in 24 states. *Reason* reports that, in 2014 alone—either through ballot initiatives or legislation—13 states could legalize marijuana, another 16 could permit medicinal marijuana, and 5 could decriminalize possession.

The shift in public opinion has been dramatic. In the early and mid- 2000s support for legalizing marijuana across Republicans, Democrats, and independents hovered between 30 and 36 percent. In October 2013, Gallup reported for the first time that a clear majority of Americans (58 percent) supported marijuana legalization. Even 35 percent of Republicans are now on board.

No doubt some Democrats support the loosening of marijuana laws in order to court a group they view as their voters. The strongest supporters of marijuana legalization are young males age 18-29. They lean towards the Democratic party, and Democrats realize that marijuana ballot initiatives could help drum up support for Democrats running in 2014, especially in Florida.

Indeed, a recent *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll found that young adults are more interested in states' legalizing marijuana than in other major news stories such as Obamacare, the crisis in Ukraine, and same-sex marriage. The same poll found that Americans believe sugar to be more harmful than marijuana. When asked to name the most harmful of four substances, 49 percent of

respondents placed tobacco first, and another 24 percent placed alcohol first. Sugar followed with 15 percent, while only 8 percent thought marijuana the most harmful.



We have reached a dangerous and absurd moment when there is unprecedented support for the legalization of a substance that is demonstrably harmful to the health and safety of individuals, as well as to the fabric of our nation. No country in the history of the world has persevered in the

legalization of drugs. None. We may learn the hard way why.

The great political scientist James Q. Wilson staunchly opposed the legalization of drugs. He explained that “drug use is wrong because it is immoral and it is immoral because it enslaves the mind and destroys the soul.” No society should want unhealthy substances destroying the minds, bodies, character, and potential of its citizens.

As Wilson put it, “The central problem with legalizing drugs is that it will increase drug consumption.” Experience shows that when previously controlled substances become permissible they are more widely used. So the question becomes: Do we want more stoned Americans? Do we want the damage from legal marijuana to approach the damage done by legal alcohol?

Alaska tried this experiment. In 1982, it legalized the possession of marijuana in small amounts. But by 1990, less than a decade later, the people of the state passed a ballot initiative to recriminalize pot, primarily because marijuana use among Alaskan teens had jumped to twice the national average.

Even in states that have allowed only medicinal marijuana, use among young people has risen. Christian Thurstone is one of the leading child psychiatrists in Colorado and head of the teen rehab center Adolescent STEP: Substance Abuse Treatment Education & Prevention Program in Denver. He has chronicled firsthand the increase in marijuana use among adolescents since Colorado legalized medicinal marijuana in 2009.

As one would expect, today’s marijuana laws in Colorado prohibit use by children. But this prohibition—as with alcohol and cigarettes—has proven ineffectual in a state where pot is now available in vending machines. Marijuana producers and sellers know what Big Alcohol and Tobacco know: Hook users early, and you have customers for life; hook them to heavy use, and the profits flow.

In their book *Marijuana Legalization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Jonathan Calukins, Mark Kleiman, Angela Hawken, and Beau Kilmer* report, “Marijuana use is highest among 18-25 year olds; their past-year rate (31 percent) is three times the U.S. average.”

Hence the pot-tarts and marijuana-infused sodas, brownies, cookies, and pasta sauces that already line the shelves of Colorado’s pot shops. Billboards advertising marijuana dot Denver freeways and feature cartoon characters; they’re obviously aimed at young people.

The authors also found that “more-than-weekly users account for more than 90 percent of marijuana demand.” In other words, legalization enables an industry that thrives on maximizing addiction.

Furthermore, the medical science is clear: Marijuana use has deleterious effects on health and behavior, especially among the young.

Marijuana today is far more potent than it was in the 1960s and '70s. This is not your parents' or grandparents' pot. "Over just the past fifteen years, potency levels measured in U.S. seizures have more than doubled," *Marijuana Legalization* reports. The University of Mississippi Potency Monitoring Project found that the average potency of all cannabis seized by state and federal law enforcement increased from 3.4 percent in 1993 to about 8.8 percent in 2008. By most estimates, the average potency today is 13 or 14 percent.

The more potent the drug the more dangerous its effects. Marijuana has already been linked to two deaths in Colorado: a 19-year-old college student who jumped to his death from a Denver hotel room after eating six times the recommended amount of a pot cookie and a man who allegedly shot and killed his wife after eating marijuana candy and hallucinating.

It seems that the American Medical Association was right when it came out with a long report opposing legalization in 2013. Among its most damning findings was: "Heavy cannabis use in adolescence causes persistent impairments in neurocognitive performance and IQ, and use is associated with increased rates of anxiety, mood, and psychotic thought disorders."

And now even casual pot smoking has been linked to harmful brain abnormalities. An important new study by researchers at Northwestern University to be published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* found that young adults who smoked pot only once or twice a week still showed significant abnormalities in the part of the brain that deals with memory and motivation.

And the consequences of marijuana use are not restricted to individual users. Over the last 10 years, fatal car accidents involving people who were stoned have tripled, according to a report in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.

Marijuana, of course, is a gateway drug. Even the authors of *Marijuana Legalization* admit that "kids who use marijuana—particularly those who start marijuana use at a young age—are statistically much more likely to go on to use other drugs than their peers who do not use marijuana."

Rather than address these problems, many supporters of marijuana change the terms of debate. But the claims that if we legalize pot we can reap economic benefits from taxation and regulation, right wrongs in the criminal justice system, and undercut the criminal cartels are mostly false.

It doesn't seem to be the case that legalization will produce a financial windfall. Early revenue estimates from Colorado's own legislative economists have already been revised downward. In any case, a few more dollars for state governments to spend pale beside the societal costs of wasted lives, incapacitated employees, doped-up students, and stoned parents neglecting life and family responsibilities.

Neither is it true that legalizing pot will rid us of the big crime syndicates. When asked how much drug-related crime, violence, and corruption marijuana legalization would eliminate, the authors of *Marijuana Legalization* admit, "Not much." To date, police in Colorado report that

the black market is alive and well. With taxes on legal pot running 25 percent, cartels can provide cheaper, untaxed weed, and consumers will buy it.

Finally, proponents of legalization claim that pot smokers (particularly young black males) are crowding our prisons. This couldn't be further from the truth. The U.S. criminal justice system is the single largest referral source for drug treatment programs. What's more, those serving time for marijuana possession alone account for less than 1 percent of the state and federal prison population, and most of these prisoners are drug dealers who pleaded guilty to possession in exchange for a lesser sentence.

The allegations of racial injustice are untrue as well. While studies of arrest data show that African Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be arrested (not incarcerated) for marijuana possession than whites, the disparity comes from purchasing behavior, not racist enforcement. A comprehensive RAND study demonstrated that African-American marijuana users were "nearly twice as likely to buy outdoors, three times more likely to buy from a stranger, and significantly more likely to buy away from their homes." All these factors greatly increase their risk of arrest.

In any case, these ancillary issues should not be allowed to sidetrack the larger question. We are at a crucial time in our nation's history, engaged in a once-in-a-lifetime debate over a national health care system and still struggling to improve schools whose graduates are behind their peers in many industrialized nations. On top of all this, do we really need more potheads? Do we need a dumber country?

Jerry Brown, the Democratic governor of California, was recently asked about legalizing pot in his state, and he put it this way: "How many people can get stoned and still have a great state or a great nation?" Last week, a leading Republican finally joined him.

"I am not going to be the governor who is going to tell our children and our young adults that marijuana use is okay, because it's not," said New Jersey governor Chris Christie on his monthly radio show. "You want to elect somebody else who's willing to legalize marijuana and expose our children to that gateway drug and the effects it has on their brain? You'll have to live with yourself if you do that, but it's not going to be this governor who does it."

This is exactly the message our leaders need to be sending.

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*The original version of this article mischaracterized the positions of these authors on legalization.