

# Legalize marijuana? No, there's too much guesswork

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AZCentral.com | August 10, 2015

## **My Turn: A serious proposal would weigh potential revenue against the drug's many costs.**

Radical public policy reform should not be based on a guess. But lately, the marijuana lobby has been telling Arizonans they should legalize marijuana “just like alcohol,” trying to persuade Arizonans to radically reverse decades of policy in everything from health care to criminal justice to education policy.

And it's all based on guesswork.

Their pitch: legalization will save money and improve education. But Arizonans should not pass a law to find out what's in it.

Supposedly, the initiative allows for limited amounts of marijuana for personal use. But what the initiative actually permits is possession of one ounce of marijuana *and* an additional 12 marijuana plants per household.

One ounce translates to about 60 marijuana joints. One plant can produce a rough average of five ounces of marijuana, or 300 joints. One home could easily produce 3,600 joints under the proposed law.

As we know from other legal and dangerous drugs, most children acquire them from their own homes or those of friends. These amounts of marijuana (especially given its new powerful potency) are a youth health policy nightmare and a drug dealer's dream.

Supposedly, Arizona stands to gain revenue by taxing the sale of marijuana. How much? The legalization lobby will not say, but estimates from others range in the neighborhood of \$35 million to \$48 million. Even at the highest estimate, this is half of 1 percent of Arizona's state budget.

Supposedly, the revenue, after costs of enforcement and administration, will be spent on education. How much? We are never told, but in the best case scenarios maybe \$20 million. This is the equivalent of \$20 a year for every public school student in Arizona.

Arizona just increased K-12 spending by about \$102 million. That was decried as a “pittance” by education professionals. What's one-fifth of a pittance? No teacher or parent would take these deals knowing the price would be more marijuana in their schools.

What money will be going out for the impact on education, criminal justice and public health? We are never told. But we are told to use alcohol as the model. The costs associated with alcohol abuse are nearly impossible to quantify, although estimates range from hundreds of millions to over a billion dollars in Arizona.

As for education, we know the costs associated with drop-outs, suspensions, and expulsions are exceedingly high, more than \$400,000 per high school student in Arizona, and that marijuana use increases the risk of dropping out and lowers educational outcomes for youth.

This doesn't even begin to count the costs to families, friendships and work environments destroyed by addiction. It doesn't account for accidents, or the increasing research that shows today's high-potency marijuana links to altered brain development, cognition impairment and psychosis, especially in teens and adolescents.

We are told legalization is for adults, not children; but just ask how that has worked out with tobacco and alcohol — the legalizers' odd model.

Upending decades of substance abuse prevention work in our health care, criminal justice and education systems should, at a very minimum, have serious estimates of income as well as expenses; we should have impact and feasibility studies estimating costs of treatment, rehabilitation, counseling, accidents, enforcement, criminal violations and true education deficits. But there are none.

When both the social and economic costs look to far outrun any potential gains, guesswork should not dictate severe public policy change. Responsible public policy demands more than a guess. So, too, do Arizonans.

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