

Marijuana legalization: Seen as Showdown Between Good Intentions and Misdirections

By David Hodes
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Bill Piper, director, Drug Policy Alliance office of national affairs speaks at a National Press Club Newsmaker, July 24, 2014.

Legalization of marijuana is an issue that has focused the attention of proponents on the failure of the war on drugs, while opponents say that is a misdirection to hide how legalization is really about the rise of a massive new industry being modeled after one of the most destructive legal drugs used by Americans today -- alcohol.

That was the topic of a spirited discussion today at a Newsmaker press conference, "Interpreting smoke signals from the marijuana skirmish line," held at the National Press Club.

Presenter Bill Piper, the director of the Drug Policy Alliance's office of national affairs in Washington said that the debate is not about whether people should be using marijuana, because they are already using marijuana. "This is a debate about who should control the marijuana trade," he said. "Should it be controlled by organized crime or licensed business owners?"

He said that there were 666,000 people arrested for marijuana infractions last year, with a disproportionate number being people of color, and that the collateral sanctions from those arrests -- loss of voting rights, loss of school loans, loss of driving license, which could lead to loss of jobs -- makes arrests like these "one of the most destructive criminal policies in the U.S. today."

Those minorities arrested, he says, are facing essentially a new Jim Crow system because they can be discriminated against for years because of their arrest for marijuana possession.

He said that the good news in Colorado, which legalized marijuana in January, is that crime is down, tax revenue is up, property values are up and jobs are up. But as with any new regulation, there are going to be problems surfacing. "Any new regulation can have a problem," he said. "Utopia is not an option."

Opposing his viewpoint, Kevin Sabet, the director of the Drug Policy Institute at the University of Florida, a policy advisor to the Obama administration and cofounder, with Patrick Kennedy, of Project Smart Approaches to Marijuana, said that Piper made the whole war on drugs issue related to legalizing marijuana sound too cut and dried.

"On the one hand Bill and his group make the war on drugs sound very black and white," he said. "On the other hand, there is this shiny object that will go a long way to get rid of cartels. We are presented with legalization and told that there are no alternatives. I wholeheartedly reject that."

Sabet said that the idea that marijuana legalization is an answer to issues of incarceration is “completely divorced from reality” because there are less than .5 percent of people in state or federal prison that are there because of “anything to do with marijuana.”

He said that, in fact, the No. 1 non-violent drug arrest category involves alcohol. “And that’s the drug that they want to treat marijuana like,” he said. “Which is worse than cocaine, meth, marijuana and prescription drugs combined. Why would we say we want to treat this other substance — marijuana -- like we treat the substance that we think is more harmful?”

He said the alcohol companies target poor neighborhoods, where the most vulnerable population lives, because they are more likely to “go down the road to addiction.” “When you are in that industry, you thrive off of addiction, you thrive off the problematic users,” he said. “And for marijuana or any other drug, that is going to be the exact thing. It’s ridiculous.”

The issue of legalization is often referred to as an experiment in state’s rights. “But nothing that is happening in Colorado or Washington [State] has anything to do with an experiment from a scientific viewpoint at all,” Sabet said. “What is happening in Colorado is a thousand-miles-per-hour creation of this massive industry with no regard to outcomes. And the leadership there have to own their policies, so of course they are going to sugarcoat the findings.”