

# Guest Opinion: The New Reefer Madness: A Very Bad Idea

by Seth Leibsohn

SonoranAlliance.com | January 15, 2015

Since just the beginning of this year, local media—both television news and print—have publicized and promoted at least 10 stories on the effort to legalize recreational marijuana use in Arizona. Two bills are being sponsored in the state Legislature and an initiative aimed at our electorate for 2016 is being drafted. Little has been said or written as to why all of this is a very bad idea for our state and our country. But it is just that, a very bad idea.

Almost every argument in favor of legalization is, quite simply, wrong. At the economic level, we are told the revenues from legalization would boost our state budget and help solve our deficit. That was a promise made by the pro-legalization movement in Colorado, which predicted \$40 million a year for school construction and \$30 million for general state funds from marijuana taxes in the state. But, as the non-partisan Tax Foundation found, the numbers thus far have come nowhere close, making it “unlikely to even meet that \$40 million need each year, leaving nothing for enforcement costs.”

Ask any governor of any state if they would rather keep all the revenue from alcohol and tobacco taxes or all the monies alcohol and tobacco abuse costs the state, and you’d get the same answer: The costs of substance abuse to each and every state are never even close to covered by the revenues generated by the taxes on those substances. As President Barack Obama’s former senior advisor on drug policy, Dr. Kevin Sabet, has put it, “[S]ocietal costs that accompany increased marijuana use will significantly outweigh any gains in tax revenue. Our experience with alcohol and tobacco shows that for every one dollar gained in taxes, 10 dollars are lost in social costs.”

Criminalizing alcohol and tobacco would be nearly impossible and equally ill-advised at this point. I am not advocating that at all. But adding one more dangerous substance to the list of already too many legal and dangerous substances is pure madness. The debate as to whether marijuana is more or less dangerous than alcohol or tobacco is irrelevant. We need, rather, to understand that marijuana is just, plain dangerous; and adding one more dangerous product (regardless of degree of danger) is more than a bad idea; it is public policy malfeasance.

The *New England Journal of Medicine* reported just last year that marijuana use by adolescents is associated with everything from increased risk of depression and anxiety to psychosis. And, it “exacerbates the course of illness in patients with schizophrenia.” Marijuana use is also associated with impaired school performance and increases the risk of dropping out of high school. In lay terms, marijuana damages the brain, especially the teen brain. Society has made tremendous strides in marginalizing and thus decreasing the use of cigarette smoking—which negatively affects the lungs and hearts of smokers. It is curious, then, that more and more are

now turning toward legalizing a product that not only damages the lungs (like cigarettes), but also the brain.

Many adults think marijuana is relatively harmless based on their experiences in high school and college a generation or more ago. But that marijuana is not today's marijuana. Today's marijuana is a different drug, with THC levels reaching into the 20 and 30 percent range of potency, as opposed to the one-and-a-half to five percent potency of the 1970s and 1980s. And it is getting stronger by the day as vendors compete to provide ever stronger affects with an ever more potent product.

The quest to legalize marijuana at the state level is also an unconstitutional nullification of federal law—as a range of Supreme Court Justices from Anthony Kennedy to Stephen Breyer to Antonin Scalia agree. It also negatively impacts other states as pot sold “legally” in one state flows across borders and causes problems in neighboring states, thus nullifying those states’ decisions to remain within the law. Indeed, some 44 percent of the marijuana sold in Colorado is sold to citizens of other states.

Despite what many say—either from unfamiliarity with the science or because of a political point of view or because some people simply want to get high legally—marijuana is dangerous. Making it legal will cost society more in financial and human damage than can ever be made up for by the false promise of tax revenue. And it will further destigmatize what every study on marijuana use and stigmatization has shown: the more society explains the dangers of marijuana, the less it is used; the more society countenances it, the more it is used. Marijuana is illegal not because of bad policy but because it causes a lot of problems—a lot more than we will ever be able to apologize for if we unload this dangerous product on, and in to, more and more of our state's and nation's youth, which is—like alcohol and tobacco—where it will end up and do the most damage.

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