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Facts



Cannabis is the most widely used illegal substance in the United States. According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 55 million Americans currently use marijuana, and 45 percent of the population has tried marijuana at least once.



Currently, 19 states, the District of Columbia and two territories have enacted legislation to regulate recreational cannabis use, and medicinal use is now permitted in 38 states, the District of Columbia and three territories.



The consensus among criminologists, criminal justice scholars and drug policy experts is that the war on drugs—described as a war on marijuana—has been a “resounding failure.”



More than 90 percent of Americans—on both sides of the political aisle—support legal adult use of medicinal or recreational cannabis.



Legalization is also increasingly supported by law enforcement, with two-thirds of police supporting it for medical or recreational cannabis.

EXPLAINER

Cannabis legalization can enhance public safety

July 2022

Summary

The federal government has an opportunity to end America’s longest war—the war on drugs. As evidenced by our experience with alcohol, national prohibition produces disastrous outcomes, including rising crime and violence, underground markets, unregulated products and continued demand for the substance.

To be consistent with existing public opinion about cannabis and to ensure we prioritize public safety, we must focus on violent crime and effectively use our law enforcement resources. Therefore, smart, thoughtful cannabis legalization that is attuned to the demands of the market and the needs of the people has the capacity to revolutionize our communities and their interactions with police.

Potential Benefits of Marijuana Legalization

- The legalization and appropriate regulation of cannabis can disrupt and dissolve illegal-market access to cannabis.
- Marijuana prohibition inherently increases police-citizen contact, which has produced disastrous outcomes for community members and the law enforcement agencies that serve them. Thus, the legalization of marijuana has the potential to reduce negative police interactions, which benefits both parties and facilitates public safety.
- The legalization of cannabis will reduce aggressive over-policing tactics, which can improve police-community relationships.
- When citizens do not agree with a particular rule of law, they are less likely to perceive law enforcement as legitimate. Because a combined 91 percent of U.S. adults believe that marijuana should be legalized for either medicinal (60 percent) or recreational (31 percent) use, the legalization of marijuana can improve police legitimacy.
- Changing the way police interact with the community has the potential to reduce negative perceptions of the police, which can reduce the likelihood of officer injury.
- With the legalization of cannabis, law enforcement resources previously dedicated to enforcing prohibition could be diverted toward the recent nationwide surge in more serious, violent crimes.

The Coalition for Cannabis Policy, Education, and Regulation’s (CPEAR) mission is to advance a comprehensive federal regulatory framework for cannabis, and public safety is essential to that discussion. Ending the federal prohibition on cannabis would give law enforcement the resources they need to keep our communities safe. Similarly, the R Street Institute believes federal descheduling of cannabis will promote federalism, increase police legitimacy and most importantly, enhance public safety.

Contact us

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