

Marijuana Legalization – Dispelling the Myths

MYTH: Marijuana is harmless.

TRUTH: Regular use of marijuana compromises the ability to learn and remember information by impairing the ability to focus, sustain, and shift attention. Long term use reduces the ability to organize and integrate complex information. Research studies demonstrate that marijuana is toxic and contributes to a variety of illnesses including: birth defects, respiratory damage, cancer, strokes, brain damage, infertility and the escalation of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and schizophrenia.

MYTH: Marijuana isn't addictive.

TRUTH: According to the world's top medical researchers, marijuana is physically and psychologically addictive. In 2009, the average level of THC, marijuana's active ingredient, was 10%. That's a significant increase from the 1970's when THC potency was between 1.5-3%. Increased potency is leading to increased admissions to emergency room visits and admissions to drug treatment programs. Marijuana use is the number one reason adolescents are admitted to treatment and ranks number two (behind alcohol) for adults.

MYTH: Our prisons are packed with non-violent marijuana offenders.

TRUTH: The idea that state correctional facilities are overburdened with defendants whose sole crime was the possession of a few joints is simply not true. Most, if not all states, have programs that are an alternative to incarceration, such as drug courts. Conviction is withheld and in some cases the charge is dropped if the offender successfully completes the program. Only 5% of inmates in federal prison for drug charges are incarcerated for drug possession. According to the Florida Department of Corrections only 2.7% of current inmates were sentenced for drug possession as their primary offense. Neither of these numbers represent just marijuana possession, they include all illicit drugs.

MYTH: Legalization would eliminate the black market.

TRUTH: Proponents of marijuana legalization claim that regulating and taxing marijuana, like tobacco, will eliminate the black market sale of the drug. The evidence indicates a different story. Each year tens of billions of cigarettes vanish into the black market, reducing government revenue and financing criminal groups. Recent media reports that in New York alone, the state is losing as much as \$20 million a month to black market cigarette purchases that are estimated at 7.3 million packs a month. The black market will continue to exist and will heavily target our youth, to whom proposed legalization laws would not apply, and adults looking to avoid paying the higher prices levied to create a regulatory system.

MYTH: The Netherlands and Portugal have model drug policies.

TRUTH: Ten years after decriminalizing illicit drugs, there was a 50% increase in drug consumption in the Portuguese population aged 20 to 24 and marijuana use rose from 12.4% to 17% in the 15-34 year old population. Since decriminalization in July 2001, the number of drug related homicides in Portugal has increased by 40%.

In 1976 The Netherlands adopted a liberal drug policy in regard to the use and sale of marijuana. This action led to the proliferation of cannabis cafes. In a 2011 letter to the country's parliament, Dutch health and justice ministers wrote, **"In order to tackle the nuisance and criminality associated with coffee shops and drug trafficking, the open-door policy of coffee shops will end."** From 1984 to 1996, marijuana use among 18-25 year olds in Holland increased twofold. Since decriminalization of marijuana, heroin addiction levels in Holland have tripled and perhaps even quadrupled by some estimates.