



The Legalization of Marijuana

Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call Group/Getty Images



While still illegal in many states, there is increasing support for the medical and recreational use of marijuana in the United States.

The United States as well as many other countries has gone through periods in which drugs were legal and times in which they were illegal. Alcohol is one classic example of a drug that was legal, then banned completely, and then re-legalized. Currently, there is a vigorous debate in the United States concerning the legalization of marijuana. Many polls suggest that about one-half of all Americans would support legalization. On the other side, the federal government has suggested that legalizing marijuana is “a bad idea” since it would increase the availability and use of other illicit drugs and pose significant health and safety risks (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/marijuana>).

Those who want to legalize marijuana suggest a number of different reasons that regulating it like alcohol would benefit society. They begin with the fact that it is the most commonly used illegal drug on the planet. This means that a wide variety of government resources are being devoted to police illegal marijuana use. These range from public information campaigns to law enforcement procedures, to spending money on jail terms, and missing out on taxes available from legal drugs. The economic benefits can be seen if you consider all of the businesses related to production, distribution, and sale of such legal drugs as alcohol and coffee, including advertising. In any given town, the number of bars and coffeehouses is typically quite large. With marijuana being legal, it is also suggested that the price would decrease and illegal drug dealers

would be unnecessary. On another level, marijuana has been shown to have medical benefits, including combatting nausea produced by chemotherapy treatment of cancer.

Those who are opposed to the legalization of marijuana often begin with the health effects. The U.S. government information arguing against the legalization of marijuana lists the following problems:

- Marijuana use is associated with dependence, respiratory and mental illness, poor motor performance, and impaired cognitive and immune system functioning, among other negative effects.
- Marijuana intoxication can cause distorted perceptions, difficulty in thinking and problem solving, and problems with learning and memory.
- Studies have shown an association between chronic marijuana use and increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and schizophrenia.
- Other research cited by the U.S. government has shown marijuana smoke to contain carcinogens and to be an irritant to the lungs. Marijuana smoke, in fact, contains 50% to 70% more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than does tobacco smoke.

California was the first state to legalize medical marijuana in 1996. Although the federal government was antagonistic to this move, other states followed. As of 2016, a total of 29 states and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana for medical use. Going against the federal government’s anti-marijuana policies, in November 2012 voters in Washington and Colorado passed initiatives making marijuana legal for recreational use. The District of Columbia and Oregon joined the recreational legalization bandwagon in 2014, California, Massachusetts, and Nevada passed measures in 2016, and some other states have pending legislation.

Thought Question: Should marijuana be treated like alcohol by the federal government?