

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/do-marijuana-arrests-help-control-violent-crime>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In 2010, the New York City police made more than 50,000 arrests for the lowest-level marijuana offenses possession and smoking marijuana in public. This is about 10,000 more than the total number of NYPD marijuana arrests between 1978 and 1995. And most of the arrestees were [young minority men](#), who now account for more than 80 percent of total marijuana arrests.

The city's aggressive marijuana policy is controversial, given its high cost and the stark racial disparities in its implementation. Nevertheless, [supporters argue](#) that enforcing laws for minor offenses is an effective way to fight violent crime and that cracking down on marijuana has contributed to lower crime rates.

A look at the research on crime reduction strategies reveals a completely different picture. Criminalization of people who pose a minimal threat to public safety is an ineffective way to control serious crime, wasting policing time and resources.

Since the 1990s, rates of major crime in New York City have fallen across the board. While criminologists continue to debate the reasons for the trend, it is clear that the city's aggressive approach to policing marijuana is not the answer.

Moreover, [researchers have seen a correlation](#) between aggressive marijuana policy and a rise in certain kinds of crime. Studies have found that increased arrests may lead to violence among distributors and sellers and property crimes among users, because of the rising price of marijuana. [Aggressively policing marijuana use also reduces the effectiveness of law enforcement in other areas](#), because of the drain on resources. Finally, while young marijuana users do not pose a high risk to public safety, [they pay a heavy price](#): an arrest record can significantly limit their employment and education opportunities.

Tough marijuana arrest practices as a part of order-maintenance policing can be traced to the [broken windows theory](#) articulated nearly 30 years ago by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. Wilson and Kelling concluded that "disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence." However, many Western countries have rejected the notion that marijuana possession and use are signs of disorder, because of their weak link to criminal activity. Increasingly, nations have adopted [a treatment-based approach to non-violent drug use](#), with promising results in promoting public health and safety.

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