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Reefer Madness or Pot

Paradise? The Surprising Legacy of the Place Where Legal Weed Began

Colorado's first-in-the-nation experiment with legalized marijuana has infused the drug into almost every corner of life.

Workers prepared for marijuana planting on Woody Farms in Pueblo, Colo. The state's first-in-the-nation experiment with legalizing recreational marijuana put it on the front lines of changing America's drug laws.

By Jack Healy

June 30, 2019

DENVER — Serenity Christensen, 14, is too young to set foot in one of Colorado's many marijuana shops, but she was able to spot a business opportunity in legal weed. She is a Girl Scout, and this year, she and her mother decided to sell their cookies outside a dispensary. "Good business," Serenity said.

But on the other side of Denver, legalization has turned another high school student, David Perez, against the warehouselike marijuana cultivations now clustered around his neighborhood. He said their skunky aroma often smacks him in the face when he walks out his front door.

These are the ripples of five years of legal marijuana. Colorado's first-in-the-nation experiment has reshaped health, politics, rural culture and criminal justice in surprising ways that often defy both the worst warnings of critics

and blue-sky rhetoric of the marijuana industry, giving a glimpse of what the future may hold as more and more states adopt and debate full legalization.

Since recreational sales began in 2014, more people here are visiting emergency rooms for marijuana-related problems, and hospitals report higher rates of mental-health cases tied to marijuana. At the same time, thousands of others make uneventful stops at dispensaries every day, like the hiking guide in the college town of Boulder who now keeps a few marijuana gummies in a locked bag to help her relax before bed.

Some families rattled by their children's marijuana problems have moved, seeking refuge in less permissive states. But over all, state surveys do not show an increase in young people smoking pot.

And while low-level marijuana charges have plummeted, the racial divide in drug arrests has persisted. State numbers show that African-Americans in Colorado were still being arrested on marijuana charges at nearly twice the rate of white people.

"You don't see drug-addled people roaming the streets, but we haven't created a utopia," said Jonathan Singer, who was one of just two state legislators who endorsed the Colorado ballot measure that made it legal for adults 21 and over to buy, consume and grow recreational marijuana.

Mr. Singer nodded to his 3-year-old, who sat in the back seat one afternoon as they headed to a picnic. "The fact that I'm willing to have this conversation in front of my daughter," he said, "shows how much we've destigmatized this."

The 'Drug Talk,' Rewritten

This is the world reconfigured by legalization — the world that 18-year-old Ethan Pierson grew up in. He was born the same year that Colorado's first medical-marijuana law took effect. He watched dispensaries bloom along the

commercial streets leading to his high school in suburban Lakewood.

“If you live in Colorado, it feels like somebody’s always smoking next to you,” said Mr. Pierson, who abstains.

Doctors, educators and state officials have been particularly worried about the effects of legalization on Colorado’s youth. Would a proliferation of recreational pot shops make marijuana seem innocuous to teenagers, despite studies showing that it is harmful to their developing minds? Would teenage pot use spike? How would it affect graduation rates and school discipline?

Five years in, surveys show that most Colorado teenagers are like Mr. Pierson: They may have tried it, but 80 percent are not current marijuana users. State surveys show that teenage marijuana use has fallen slightly since medical marijuana sales ramped up in 2009, and has been basically flat since full legalization.

But Mr. Pierson and other students and parents said that legalization had changed marijuana’s image and availability.

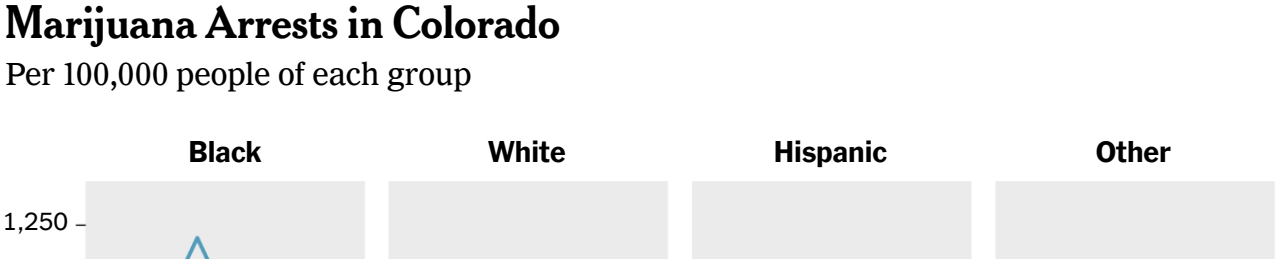
Ethan Pierson was born the same year that Colorado's first medical-marijuana law took effect.
Benjamin Rasmussen for The New York Times

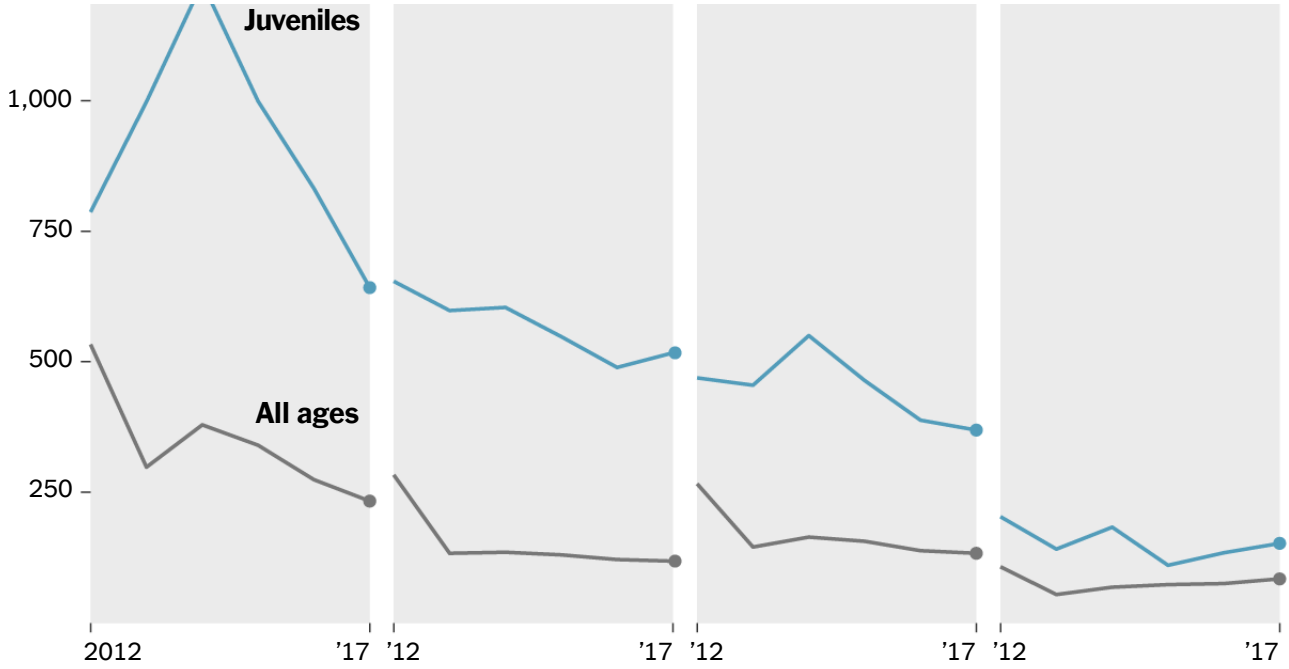
Older siblings or even parents can now buy it legally and pass it along. Classmates take Snapchat videos of one another smoking on the edges of school. Instead of dime bags, there is now a buffet of concentrates, tinctures and edibles — still illegal for young people, but easy to come by.

"It's easy to conceal," Mr. Pierson said. "They carry it around in their purse or pencil bag."

Some school administrators say they are catching more students using marijuana and fewer drinking. School disciplinary numbers show that marijuana is a leading reason students are punished or handed over to the police. But the overall number of students being expelled for drug infractions has actually fallen since legalization, in part because Colorado lawmakers sought to get rid of "zero tolerance" policies at schools around the same time pot was legalized.

In a fourth-floor juvenile courtroom in Denver, where children stand in front of a magistrate on charges including curfew violations and fighting, the number of marijuana possession cases is thinning out. The share of teenagers arrested for marijuana offenses has fallen by about 20 percent since Colorado voted to legalize, but black youths and adults are still getting arrested at much higher rates than white or Hispanic Coloradans, according to a state report. In 2017, black people in the state were arrested on marijuana charges at double the rate of white ones, according to the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice.





Note: Juveniles are between 10 and 17 years old. • Source: Colorado Bureau of Investigation • By Jason Kao

Some parents said that marijuana was becoming too normal, another legally permissible health risk with slick marketing, like alcohol or cigarettes. But marijuana shops cannot advertise on billboards. They are required to check identification at the door. They are supposed to be located at least 1,000 feet from schools. Edibles can no longer look like gummy bears or fruit or be called "candies."

To some parents, this is not enough. They say their children smell marijuana on hikes, and count dispensaries on their rides home from school. Before play dates, Ben Cort now asks other parents whether they keep marijuana in the house before his daughter visits a new friend's home. Sujata Fretz, a physician in Denver, said she found herself having a conversation with her 13-year-old son about marijuana that was shaped by the proliferation of the industry.

"I'm forced to have a conversation with my kids because it's more public and out there," Dr. Fretz said. "I can't just say, 'Hey drugs are bad' when it's legal and there are stores that sell it. My goal is to get them to not use marijuana."

‘Nothing Is Completely Safe’

The numbers seem clear: Nearly twice as many Coloradans smoke pot as the rest of America. The number of adults who use has edged up since legalization.

Now, the battle between legalization’s supporters and foes is focused on whether heavier pot use is hurting people’s health. It is a high-stakes question, and Andrew Monte, an emergency and medical toxicology physician and researcher at the University of Colorado Hospital, is on the front lines, trying to decipher what the numbers are saying.

Hospital data analyzed by Dr. Monte and others indicate that more people are arriving at emergency rooms for marijuana-related reasons. He has treated many of them. Some are heavy marijuana users with severe vomiting. Others are children who have eaten edibles, accidentally or not. They come to the E.R. disoriented, dehydrated or hallucinating after consuming too much marijuana.

“There’s a disconnect between what was proposed as a completely safe drug,” Dr. Monte said. “Nothing is completely safe.”

And researchers have reported that patients in the E.R. with marijuana-related cases were five times as likely to have a mental-health issue as those with other cases.

The state has seen a proliferation of recreational pot shops. Benjamin Rasmussen for The New York Times

Five years of legalization have yielded stories of haunting deaths: A father of three who shot his wife dead after eating edibles. A young man visiting Colorado whose family blamed his suicide at a ski resort on the marijuana he had consumed. Rising numbers of drivers in fatal traffic crashes who test positive for marijuana (though a positive test does not necessarily mean the driver was high).

But none of the emergency-room visits tracked by researchers in recent studies ended with a patient's death. And Dr. Monte, who has treated and studied so many cannabis cases, said that thousands of Coloradans every day safely use marijuana.

A retired farmer in Southern Colorado takes it as a balm for his aching feet. It was how a woman in Denver surmounted the nausea and pain after a double mastectomy and chemotherapy. Veterans fought to use it for post-traumatic stress. Children use it for severe seizure disorders. It is how Alli Fronzaglia, who runs a women's hiking group, relaxes before bed.

"It's not wreaking havoc," she said. "There are people using responsibly in Colorado."

Stephanie Angell, 63, used to think she was one of them. Then she began smoking heavily every day, after she learned she had multiple sclerosis in 2014. She started smoking after waking up, and then gravitated to the thick, amberlike extractions that offer higher concentrations of psychoactive THC. Dispensaries offered specials, she said, like Edible Wednesdays.

"I began to smoke morning, noon and night," she said.

Compared with the 72,000 drug overdose deaths in America in 2017, with the crimes and loss spawned by the opioid crisis, marijuana addiction, users say, can seem too innocuous to even merit attention. State health data have not shown a surge of patients seeking addiction treatment.

But Ms. Angell said her habit had left her life dull, like a worn pencil. She lost interest in cross-stitching and other hobbies and felt like she had to smoke before going to the movies or to dinner.

Ms. Angell still supports legalization. But she and other heavy users say the risks of marijuana dependence are real, and are being overlooked as medical and recreational marijuana spread to 34 states. While legalization efforts failed this year in states including New Jersey and New York, Illinois last week became the 11th state to legalize recreational marijuana.

“There’s a real denial,” Ms. Angell said. “It’s a very subtle, subtle addiction.”

Planting and Busts

There’s a new kind of planting season in Pueblo County, home to wide acres of pastureland and green chile fields that elected officials want to remake as the Napa Valley of legal weed.

Law-enforcement officials say that legalization has also created fertile soil for black-market cultivations that pop up in basements. Legalization advocates said that regulating marijuana would starve cartels and illegal marijuana trafficking. But some officials say it has made the problem worse.

As licensed growers in Pueblo legally harvested 113,000 marijuana plants from fields and greenhouses, police and sheriff’s officers here have been raiding houses converted to illegal cultivations that they say export marijuana to other states. People cover the windows to hide the glowing grow lights. They rewire the electric and water lines to avoid the meters.

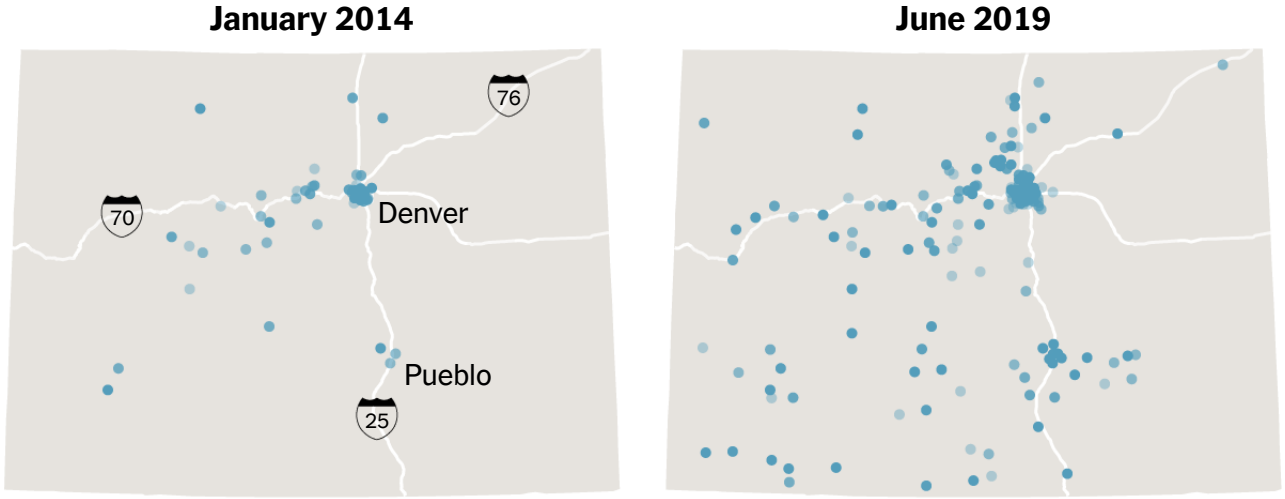
Michael Cole is the owner of Colorado Rocky Mountain Farms, which grows marijuana, in Pueblo.
Benjamin Rasmussen for The New York Times

Last month, police and federal drug-enforcement agents raided 240 homes around Denver and Northern Colorado that were illegally growing marijuana, the largest sweep since legalization. Jason Dunn, the United States attorney in Denver, said it was a sign Colorado had become “the epicenter of black-market marijuana in the United States.”

Legalization coincided with a 20 percent rise in violent crime rates in Colorado from 2012 to 2017, according to a state report, giving ammunition to critics. But it is almost impossible to attribute broad changes in crime rates to just one cause. Over the same period, the number of marijuana-related arrests fell by half. The Denver Police say that marijuana offenses — which make up less than 1 percent of overall crimes — fell by about 25 percent since recreational sales began in 2014.

Retail Marijuana Businesses, 2014 and Now

In 2014, marijuana businesses were concentrated in Colorado’s big cities and around major roadways. Since then, they have proliferated in border towns and rural areas as well.



Source: Colorado Department of Revenue • By Jason Kao

Still, tiny rural places and struggling cities that were left out of Colorado's booming economy have decided it is worth the gamble. So marijuana shops are crowding into tiny towns near the Utah, Nebraska or New Mexico borders — a concern for officials worried about out-of-state trafficking. Farmland and open space are becoming huge cultivations and processing centers.

"We were pretty broke," said Patricia Reigel, the mayor of Moffat, a town of 119 people in the sagebrush of the San Luis Valley. It now has two dispensaries and recently approved plans for a cannabis campus that could eventually hold 43 cultivations and processing businesses.

A Green Party

When it comes to politics, legalization was just the beginning.

With a new, marijuana-friendly governor in office, bipartisan groups of Colorado legislators passed a half-dozen marijuana laws this year that were on the cannabis industry's wish list.

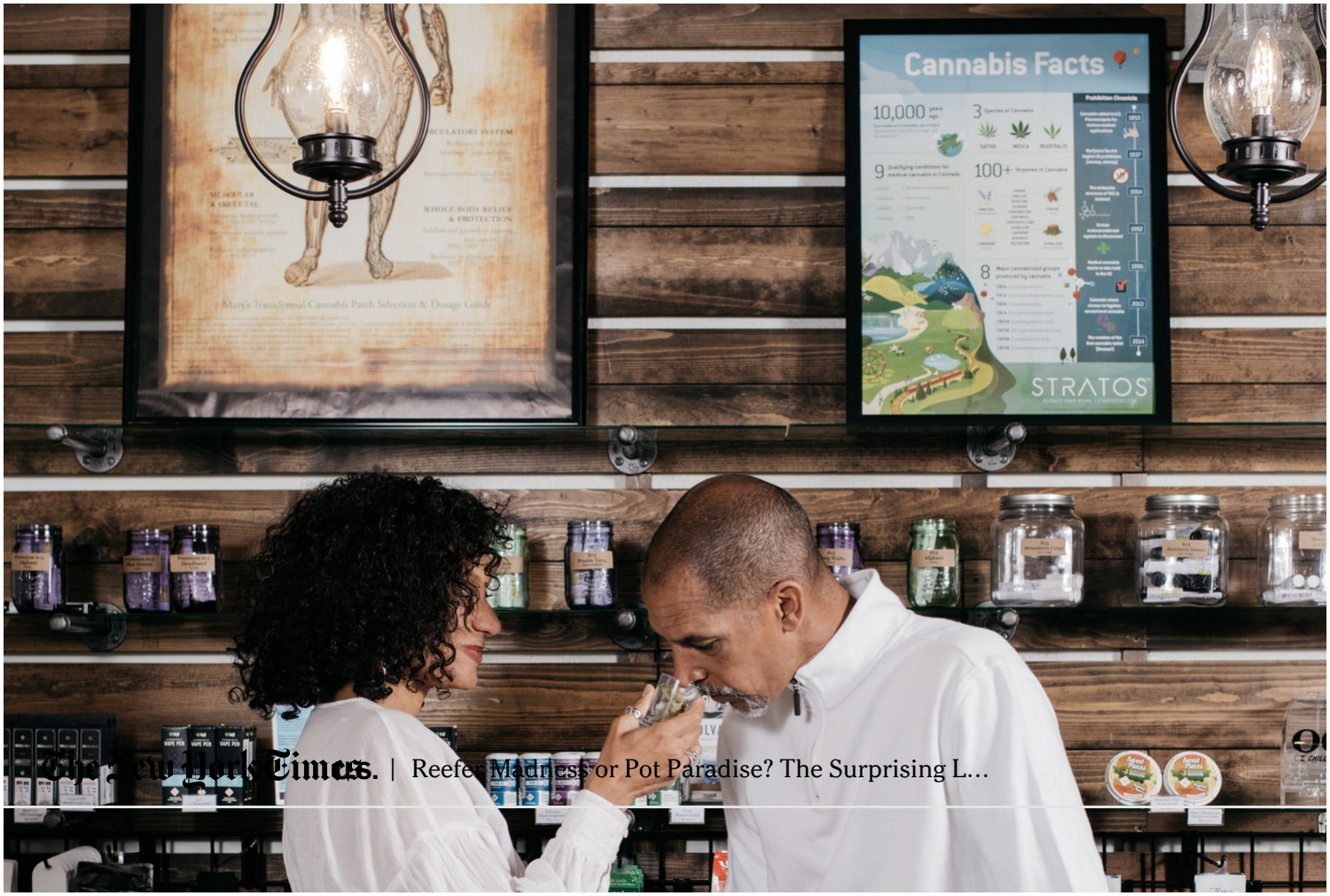
They approved marijuana-delivery services to bring weed to people's front doors. Out-of-state investment and publicly traded cannabis companies. Pot lounges — called "marijuana hospitality establishments" — that could allow consumption and be exempted from the state's indoor clean-air laws.

The state also allowed medical marijuana to be used to treat autism, or in place of opioids. Medical marijuana is less taxed than marijuana sold as "recreational."

The laws were just one sign of the growing political clout of an industry that does $1.5 billion in yearly sales here.

Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, campaigned on supporting marijuana. For his cannabis adviser, he picked not a law-enforcement type or public-health official, but a onetime owner of a Denver dispensary who had run a marijuana consulting business.

But as the industry expands, some of marijuana's earliest supporters and first entrepreneurs have raised concerns about being left out as pot companies in the United States and Canada chase billion-dollar valuations and hire powerful politicians like John Boehner, the Republican former House speaker. As marijuana starts to look like the next Silicon Valley, early advocates such as Wanda James, the first African-American woman in Colorado to own a dispensary, now worry that small businesses, women, and people of color — who were disproportionately hurt by harsh marijuana laws — are now getting left on the sidelines.



Wanda James and Scott Durrah, who became the first African-Americans to obtain a license to sell marijuana in America, at their dispensary, Simply Pure, in Denver.
Benjamin Rasmussen for The New York Times

In Denver's working-class Elyria Swansea neighborhood, the newly elected City Council member Candi CdeBaca supported legalization and won an endorsement from Colorado Norml, the marijuana-reform group. But she has also become a critic of the marijuana cultivation and processing businesses that are concentrated in her largely Hispanic neighborhood.

David Perez, 17, said he had gotten used to the smell that leaks out of marijuana businesses in his neighborhood. It was in the air one afternoon as he walked to a friend's graduation party.

“Every time I go for a walk or go to the rec, I smell it. It’s everywhere,” he said. He didn’t like it, but he was used to it. “It just feels normal.”