Cole Gannon

Professor Cudahy

EWRT 1A

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Legalization of Cannabis Considered Beneficial

"Hey kid, want some pot?" If you're of a certain age, you have probably seen a video in school where a shady-looking figure offers marijuana to an unsuspecting teen. There’s one thing those videos forget to tell you: cannabis isn't actually that bad after all, and rather than suppressing it, the government would be better served legalizing it. While schools push strong anti-drug propaganda, public approval for the legalization of marijuana has been on a steady upward trajectory, especially with younger age groups (Jones). Public sentiment isn’t the only thing changing; states have been decriminalizing or legalizing marijuana for medicinal and recreational use (Karmen). The UnitedStates of America should legalize marijuana at the federal level for economic and tax-related benefits, a viable pain relief alternative to opioids, and an overall reduction in drug-related crime.

Bringing the cannabis market above-ground allows for many economic benefits. With a third wave of stimulus checks nearly ready to be sent out, legalizing and taxing cannabis at the federal level would be an effective way to raise money to offset the government’s deficit. Since 2018, California was able to collect a whopping $845.3 million dollars in tax from cannabis alone (California Department of Tax and Fee Administration). If marijuana was legalized federally, an estimated million jobs and 106 billion dollars in taxes could be created by 2025 (New Frontier Data). Some groups believe that the myriad of benefits is not without a catch. The Office of National Drug Control Policy believes that one of these catches is environmental impact:

“These grow sites affect wildlife, vegetation, water, soil, and other natural resources through the use of chemicals, fertilizers, terracing, and poaching … criminal organizations [exploit] some of these public and tribal lands as grow sites for marijuana.”

In essence, the illegality of cultivating cannabis is itself forcing growers to use unscrupulous and destructive means to meet market demands. If pot was legalized at the federal level, the United States government could designate specific locations for farming it. The creation of a regulatory agency would allow control over the adverse environmental impacts cited within the ONDCP’s statement. Even still, the ONDCP believes that “the social costs of legalizing marijuana would outweigh any possible tax that could be levied.” One of these concerns is excessive burden on the judicial and healthcare systems. However, these concerns don’t line up with data. The judicial system already is forced to handle the prosecution of an estimated tens of thousands (Lind) of non-violent drug users per year. Legalizing pot would reduce the number of cases the judicial system is forced to handle while incentivizing those who use harder drugs users to switch to something less harmful and more legal (Lachenmeier 1).

Besides recreational usage and broad legalization, data supports the usage of marijuana as an opioid substitute. Contrary to the concerns of the ONDCP, a study published by the United States Department of Health and Human Services has found as much as a 23% reduction in any opioid related hospitalization after legalization. Regarding the substitution of opioids with pot, a survey conducted by UCSF found that a staggering 40% of respondents indicated that their usage of opioids decreased as a result of using cannabis (Ishida 5) while only 8% of respondents indicated that their usage increased. 36% of those who did substitute opioids with marijuana claimed its efficacy in pain management was superior to opioids (Ishida 4). These conclusions are corroborated by other similar reports such as a report from The National Academics of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine: “There is substantial evidence that cannabis is an effective treatment for chronic pain in adults.” (Americans for Safe Access 4). In several studies run by the Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research at UC San Diego, marijuana was confirmed as an effective pain reliever for patients that suffered with neuropathic pain, general pain (artificially introduced via injection), and multiple sclerosis (MS). Not only is marijuana effective for pain management and relief, in some cases even more effective than opioids, 58% of respondents reported either fewer side effects or withdrawal symptoms using marijuana instead of opioids (Ishida 5). Medical marijuana’s economic impact is positive as well. Nationwide usage of medical marijuana under Medicare would have saved an average of 165.2 million dollars per year (Americans For Safe Access 5). These benefits not only contradict the negative messaging pushed by schools and other moralistic organizations, they are useful to patients looking for alternative means of pain management and relief.

Legalization of marijuana is linked to a decrease in crime, and not just from possession and distribution. Across the board, a legalization of marijuana is linked to a 7.25% overall decrease in violent crime which includes a 24% reduction in homicide (Gruia 367). Data within the University of Texas’s study on the legalization of medical marijuana seems to corroborate these conclusions. Even when interpreted skeptically, the data suggests that the legalization of medical marijuana has, at worst, no effect on crime (Morris 6). Cartels and other gangs are often associated with the violence that surrounds illegal drugs such as marijuana. Legalizing medical marijuana negatively effects Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) by effectively disrupting their monopoly. The decreased market presence of these DTOs is visible in the data: “the introduction of MML reduces the violent crime rate in Mexican-border states by between 15 to 25 percent” (Gavrilova 39). It’s fair to assume that the complete legalization of marijuana would decrease DTO presence and it’s associated violence even more.

Overall, the data suggest that federal legalization of marijuana would bring widespread benefits to the United States of America. With its relative safety compared to other drugs such as alcohol (Lachenmeier 1), pot seems to pose few downsides even when used recreationally. Economic and environmental benefits such as taxes and regulatory opportunities incentivize local governments to condone its cultivation and usage in a prudent manner. Medical applications of pot are not only just as effective but provably safer for the patient while causing fewer withdrawal symptoms. Even medical marijuana’s introduction into border states throws a wrench into the profits of drug cartels, an amusing concept. Violence seems to be a complete non-issue. Even conservatively, widespread legalization of pot can be reasonably assumed to have no effect on violent crime. With any luck, the change in public sentiment, the looming deficit, and many benefits should convince lawmakers to legalize at the federal level. Soon, you may be the shady character offering pot to some minor, the freedom that America was intended to have by our founding fathers.

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