

Marijuana Legalization and Its Impact on Crime Rates in Localities Across the United States

By Ian Lynch

Introduction

Recreational marijuana use has been a prominent pastime for many Americans since as early as 19101, when it was introduced recreationally by Mexican Immigrants fleeing the Mexican Revolution. Upon its strong introduction, heavy campaigning against the drug resulted in many states outlawing it and Congress eventually passing the Marijuana Tax Act in 1937, which criminalized it. Despite researchers beginning to unearth the positive medical benefits of marijuana, U.S. policy continued to be anti-marijuana. This began to change, however, when California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana use in 1996. In the following years, the hysteria surrounding marijuana continued to fade and more states followed in California's footsteps by legalizing medical marijuana. Then, in 2012, Colorado and Washington became the first states to legalize recreational cannabis, allowing adults over the age of 21 to purchase marijuana from legal dispensaries. Since then, 22 states have followed suit (along with Washington D.C.). State legalization of recreational marijuana did not come easily, though, as many voters were concerned over the impact the legislation would have on crime in their local communities. This, however, was unfounded. Despite marijuana use being associated with increased crime rates, states found that crime was unaffected by the legislation.

Drug-Related Offenses

When the legislation to legalize marijuana was proposed in Colorado and Washington, politicians and citizens across the two states voiced a strong concern that legalization would lead to an increase in harder drug usage and drug-related crime. However, according to Alexis J. Harper and Cody Jorgensen2, the legalization of recreational marijuana did not lead to an increase in general crime rates across the state. Initially, these authors point out the obvious statement that marijuana possession charges decreased post legalization. Since it is now legal to possess certain quantities of marijuana, it makes sense that the arrests for this crime would decrease. It did not decrease to zero, though, as possession of quantities above a certain threshold (over two ounces in Colorado, for example) is still illegal.

On the other hand, harder drug usage did seem to increase according to an article by Seong-min Park et al. In "the Effect of Marijuana Legalization on the Trajectories of Hard Drug-Related Hospitalizations: [...] in Washington, 2009-2015," the researchers found that marijuana legalization did lead to increased harder drug usage, as marijuana usage acted as a gateway drug. While this paper does not directly discuss drug-related crime, it is safe to assume that as drug-related hospitalizations are increasing, so is hard drug-usage, and so is drug-related crime. Even though researchers came to this conclusion, they did find evidence that could make marijuana legalization more of a deterrent than a gateway. Researchers suggested that lowering prices on retail marijuana may lead to a decrease in hard drug usage, as more users could afford to "replace" their harder habits with the less damaging marijuana.

Property Crime

For many citizens, opening dispensaries in their neighborhoods created fears of increased crime in the area. For the most part, this also turned out to be a moot point. However, this fear initially became reality in certain areas. In a paper titled "Exploring the Neighborhood-Level Impact of Retail Marijuana Outlets on Crime in Washington State" by John Thacker3 et al, this topic is discussed in depth. In this paper, Thacker et al argues that the legalization of marijuana did lead to an increase in local and neighborhood crime. They argue that this is because of more dispensaries bringing in more foot traffic to the area, and while there was an uptick in neighborhood crime, they discovered that comparable results were found when putting an alcohol store into a neighborhood. Once again, though, Thacker et al theorized that this could be because of the federal ban on marijuana sales. Since marijuana is illegal at the federal level, dispensaries are rarely able to take credit for purchases. This means that they have been largely locked into a cash-only business. Since the recreational marijuana industry is also very profitable, the excess heaps of cash laying around can attract unsavory types to the business. This in turn can lead to an increase in foot traffic by criminals around the dispensary and an increase in property crime as a direct result of marijuana legalization. In addition to violent crime, Harper and Jorgensen's paper covered the legislation's impact on property crime as well. In this field, the researchers concluded that there had been no meaningful impact on burglaries in Colorado. On the other hand, there was a slight uptick in burglaries in Washington state directly following the legalization of marijuana, suggesting that marijuana may be to blame. The researchers posit that this was actually a result of the continued federal ban on marijuana sales, rather than the legalization itself. So, while the increase may not have occurred without legalization, blame could also lie in the unfortunate side effect of running a cash only business.

While Washington state did notice an uptick in property crime surrounding the opening of dispensaries, researchers took notice that these were mainly short-term effects. In "The Effect of Marijuana Legalization on Crime Rates" by Kylie E. McCarthy4, the author acknowledged and disputed three main spikes in crime associated with dispensaries opening. Firstly, Colorado noticed an immediate increase in crime following legalization, however that increase began before legalization and merely continued past it. Secondly, Washington State noticed an immediate increase in property crimes, burglary and aggravated assault, but that increase was only seen in the immediate aftermath of legalization; not in the long-term. Thirdly and finally, the paper analyzed the opening of five medical marijuana dispensaries in Washington D.C. While these are not recreational dispensaries, they are still valid to observe as they still sell marijuana for cash purchases. In this case, once again, the study found that four of them did not show an increase in neighborhood crime rates. Regarding the one dispensary that showed an increase, the original study author stated that the increase began prior to the legalization of medical marijuana.

Violent Crime

In addition to possession charges, the paper by Harper and Jorgensen also covered the rates of violent crime in Colorado and Washington. Through their research, the authors found that "Legalizing marijuana had no meaningful impact on violent crime in Colorado" (Harper & Jorgensen). They found this to be true in areas where other crime had increased as well. For example, in a neighborhood in Denver they found that "property crime increased by 18% in the immediate area surrounding the marijuana dispensary; however, no effects on violent crime were observed." An explanation for this was posited by Dragone et al in their paper, "Crime and the Legalization of Recreational Marijuana." This paper's authors provide two explanations for why violent crimes may have decreased. First, marijuana use is attributed and known to induce feelings of relaxation and happiness; feelings that are not usually associated with those felt during violent crime. Second, since marijuana is now widely available, the researchers posit that marijuana use may be substituted in place of other drugs. For example, if someone uses marijuana over methamphetamines, the researchers think it is safer to assume the person will be less likely to commit violent crime because of the effects of the drugs on their psyche.

Police Effectiveness

Another concern of legalizing recreational marijuana was how it would affect the police force. Some argued that if marijuana was legal then the work force would be overtaken by a cloudy haze of marijuana use. On the other hand, supporters of legalization argued that police officers would become more effective because of being able to better distribute their efforts. Supporters argued that since police officers would no longer have to devote a major piece of their workforce, funding, etc. towards policing marijuana, they would be able to devote those resources to more serious crimes instead.

In a paper titled "Effects of Recreational Marijuana Legalization on Clearance Rates for Violent Crimes: Evidence from Oregon," Guangzhen Wu et al attempt to answer the question of whether legalization leads to a less-effective police force. In their paper, the authors found that the supporters of legalization were largely correct in their prior beliefs. After marijuana was legalized in Oregon, researchers saw an increase in the clearance rate of violent crime, or the rate at which violent crimes were solved. While they attributed this increase to the legislation, the researchers could not be definitive in saying that the increase was a direct result of it. Because of this, the authors state that there needs to be more research into this area to accurately attribute the increase to the legislation. In addition to the murkiness of their conclusions, the researchers found that the initial increase in violent crime clearance rates began to decrease as time went on. This could be a result of officers simply making their quotas by looking elsewhere, like violent crimes. Since many police forces across the state utilize arrest quotas, officers may have been looking to other crime categories to meet the number of arrests required of them. Or this could be a result of the better allocation of resources, as the proponents of legalization claim. As of right now, the answer to why clearance rates increased is unknown and only furthers the notion that more research is needed to be done on this topic.

Conclusion

When recreational marijuana legislation began to be introduced to states across the country, it was met with many concerns regarding the safety and general wellbeing of the public at large. One of the opposition's main concerns was that marijuana legalization would increase local crime rates across the board. Now that recreational marijuana has been legalized for recreational use in many different states, researchers are provided with the opportunity to go back and analyze oppositional concerns to see if they came to fruition. In the area of concern over an increase in crime, the opposition was met with studies that contradict and invalidate their prior concerns. In the major categories of crime I have listed out (drug-related, violent, and property-related), only property-related crime saw an increase, and even that was either short-term or debunked based on further research. In addition to this, the integrity of police was questioned prior to legalization; there was debate surrounding if marijuana use entered the mainstream, could it inhibit police officers and lead to a decrease in clearance rates. This concern, as well, was found to be unbased. In Oregon researchers found that the clearance rate for violent crimes had increased following marijuana usage, something attributed to a reallocation of police resources. Overall, despite the concerns and prophecies being proposed by the opposition surrounding the potential increase in crime rates, researchers often found the contrary in their studies; that the legalization of recreational marijuana did not lead to an increase in crime rates.

References

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Addendum

The changes that I made to prettify my paper were fairly simple and straight forward and I tried to focus on emulating how an article would look on a news website. To start, I decided that the different sections of my paper would pop better if they physically stood out from the background of the page. To accomplish this I set the text-boxes to a lighter beige color and the background color to a darker grey color. Following this, I added a dark, black outline to further exttentuate the borders of the text-boxes. Then, I decided that centering the text into the middle 50% of the screen would be easier for the reader to follow as there will be less distance for their eyes to travel between lines. Along the same vein, I used 'justify' on each section so that the text were uniform columns. I also changed the fonts across my paper. For the titles, I used the Times New Roman font as I had read that it is a common font for titular usage. For the body pieces of my paper I used Verdana as I had also read that this font is good for large bodies of text. Finally, I made some changes to the padding and margin throughout the elements of my paper. I did this in order to create better spacing so that the reader can distinguish the pieces of the paper easier. For padding, this involved general padding of small pixel sizes to create minimal borders inside of the text-boxes. Margin was used in order to create the space between the actual sections of the paper.