

# Arguments Against Marijuana Legalization and/or Decriminalization From a Prevention Standpoint

## Background

To date, 14 states have either decriminalized marijuana use for any purpose and/or legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes. Similar efforts are currently underway in several other states. Legislation of this kind severely undermines the prevention efforts of community anti-drug coalitions throughout the country and their message that marijuana is not a benign drug.

## Marijuana Is Addictive

### Claim:

- Proponents of decriminalization and legalization purport that marijuana is a harmless, non-addictive drug.

### The Facts:

- The Drug Enforcement Administration classifies marijuana as an addictive, Schedule I drug.
- Marijuana is the most widely abused illicit drug in the nation among both youth and adults:
  - According to the 2009 *Monitoring the Future* results, **42% of high school seniors have tried marijuana, with 20.6% of them reporting that they have used marijuana in the last 30 days.**
- Treatment rates for marijuana addiction have skyrocketed in recent years:
  - The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that clinical diagnoses rates for marijuana abuse and/or dependence for minors has **increased by a staggering 492.1 percent** between 1992 (when marijuana use was at its lowest point) and 2006.
  - Concurrently, there was a **53.7 percent decrease in rates of clinical diagnoses for all other substances combined**, including alcohol, illicit, controlled prescription and over-the-counter drugs and inhalants.

## Marijuana Addiction is a Pediatric Onset Disease

### Claim:

- Proponents of decriminalization and legalization purport that marijuana use begins in adulthood rather than adolescence.

### The Facts:

- According to Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), drug addiction is a pediatric/adolescent onset disease and **prevention of first use is critical.**

- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) most recent *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH) revealed that the mean age at first use for marijuana initiates is 17.8.
- **61.8% of all marijuana initiates began prior to the age of 18 in 2008.**
- While these trends are disturbing, this national data set masks the fact that many communities throughout the country are seeing a much, much lower age of initiation for marijuana use – **often times as young as 12 and 13.**
- Using marijuana at a young age can have deleterious effects on youth:
  - The younger the age a person first uses drugs, the higher their chance of adult drug dependency and addiction.
  - The NSDUH has substantiated this fact as it reported that **youth who first smoke marijuana under the age of 14 are more than five times as likely to abuse drugs as adults.**

## Marijuana Use in Adolescence Effects Brain Development

### Claim:

- Proponents of decriminalization and legalization purport that marijuana use does not impair brain function or hamper brain development.

### The Facts:

- While drug use disrupts brain function of users regardless of age, NIDA research demonstrates that these effects are much more detrimental and long-lasting among youth.
- Marijuana use predominantly affects the pre-frontal cortex, which is the last area of the brain to develop and has not fully matured in adolescence.
- Marijuana use “disrupts the brain function critical to motivation, memory, learning, judgment and behavior control.”

## Marijuana Use Linked to Poor Academic Performance

### Claim:

- Proponents of decriminalization and legalization purport that marijuana use does not hamper school performance.

### The Facts:

- The NSDUH has reported that **youth with an average grade of D or below were more than four times as likely to have used marijuana in the past year than youth with an average grade of A.**
- The NIDA study entitled “Marijuana Abuse: Age of Initiation, Pleasure of Response Foreshadow Young Adult Outcomes,” found that **youth who initiate marijuana use by age 13 usually do not go to college**, while those who have abstained from marijuana use, on average, complete almost three years of college.
- It also found that even if they decrease their usage later in life, **those who begin using marijuana by age 13 are more likely to report lower income and lower level of schooling by age 29.**

## Marijuana Use Linked to Carrying a Gun, Gang Involvement and Thoughts of Suicide

### Claim:

- Proponents of decriminalization and legalization purport that marijuana does not contribute to violent behavior and/or victimization; rather it contributes to a mellow mood

### The Facts:

- A clear link between violence and marijuana use among adolescents has been established, and exists for gang involvement, and thoughts of suicide.
  - In its *2009 National Summary of its Questionnaire Report for Grades 6-12*, Pride Surveys reported that **of those students who carried a gun to school, 64.0% used marijuana; of those involved in a gang, 51.8% had used marijuana; and of those who had thoughts of suicide, 45.4% used marijuana.**

## Conclusion

Responsible drug policy must focus on effective research based efforts to both prevent and treat drug use. Legislation seeking to decriminalize and/or legalize marijuana will reduce the perception of harm associated with its use thereby increasing the number of new initiates and enabling existing addictive behaviors to continue. This is not a message we can afford to send to America’s youth.

## Legalization and Decriminalization Lead to Lower Perceptions of Harm

### Claim:

- Proponents of decriminalization and legalization purport that, like alcohol and tobacco, marijuana should be regulated, and that doing so will lead to lower addiction rates and an increased perception of harm or risk.

### The Facts:

- Research illustrates that the decline in the use of any illegal drug is directly related to its perception of harm or risk by the user. Decriminalizing and/or legalizing marijuana normalizes a drug that clearly has the potential to be both dangerous and addictive.
- While it is true that alcohol and tobacco addiction rates are higher than that of marijuana, this is the case in large part because they are legal substances and the stigma associated with them has been removed. Doing the same for marijuana will only ensure that addiction rates continue to rise.
- This is evidenced by the facts that:
  - Those **states which have implemented “medical” marijuana ballot initiatives have some of the highest addiction rates in the country.**
  - In those states where marijuana has been equated with medicine, the perception of harm relating to that drug has been drastically reduced and social norms to reinforce “no use” messages, have been undermined.
  - According to the *State Estimates of Substance Use from the 2006–2007 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health*, released by SAMHSA in May of 2009:
    - In seven of the 14 states that have already legalized or decriminalized marijuana use, the perception of harm associated with smoking marijuana once a month has declined among those 12 and older and among those aged 18-25.
    - In 11 of these 14 states, the perception of harm is actually lower than the national average.