

NORML

Working to Reform Marijuana Laws

PERSONAL USE

Introduction

NORML supports the removal of all penalties for the private possession and responsible use of marijuana by adults, including cultivation for personal use, and casual nonprofit transfers of small amounts. This policy, known as decriminalization, removes the consumer -- the marijuana smoker -- from the criminal justice system, while maintaining criminal penalties against those who sell or traffic large quantities of the drug.



In 1972, President Richard Nixon's National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse recommended that Congress adopt this policy nationally in the United States. Since then, more than a dozen government-appointed commissions in both the U.S. and abroad have recommended similar actions. None of these commissions have endorsed continuing to arrest and jail minor marijuana offenders. Summaries of these studies are available at: http://www.norml.org/index.cfm?Group_ID=3382.

Since 1973, 12 state legislatures -- Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Oregon -- have enacted versions of marijuana decriminalization. In each of these states, marijuana users no longer face jail time (nor in most cases, arrest or criminal records) for the possession or use of small amounts of marijuana. According to national polls, voters overwhelmingly support these policies. In Oregon, voters recently reaffirmed their state's decriminalization law by a 2-1 margin in a statewide referendum.

More than 30 percent of the U.S. population lives under some form of marijuana decriminalization, and according to government and academic studies, these laws have not contributed to an increase in marijuana consumption nor negatively impacted adolescent attitudes toward drug use. Summaries of these findings are available at: http://www.norml.org/index.cfm?Group_ID=3383.

Enforcing marijuana prohibition costs taxpayers an estimated \$10 billion annually and results in the arrest of more than 734,000 individuals per year -- far more than the total number of arrestees for all violent crimes combined, including murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. This policy is a tremendous waste of national and state criminal justice resources that should be focused on combating serious and violent crime. In addition, it invites government unnecessarily into areas of our private lives, and needlessly damages the lives and careers of hundreds of thousands of otherwise law-abiding citizens. NORML believes now, as former President Jimmy Carter told Congress in 1977, that: "Penalties against drug use should not be more damaging to an individual

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than the use of the drug itself. Nowhere is this more clear than in the laws against the possession of marijuana in private for personal use."

Responsible Use

Marijuana is the third most popular recreational drug in America (behind only alcohol and tobacco), and has been used by nearly 80 million Americans. According to government surveys, some 20 million Americans have smoked marijuana in the past year, and more than 11 million do so regularly despite harsh laws against its use. Our public policies should reflect this reality, not deny it.

Marijuana is far less dangerous than alcohol or tobacco. Around 50,000 people die each year from alcohol poisoning. Similarly, more than 400,000 deaths each year are attributed to tobacco smoking. By comparison, marijuana is nontoxic and cannot cause death by overdose. According to the prestigious European medical journal, *The Lancet*, "The smoking of cannabis, even long-term, is not harmful to health. ... It would be reasonable to judge cannabis as less of a threat ... than alcohol or tobacco."

As with alcohol consumption, marijuana smoking can never be an excuse for misconduct or other improper behavior. For example, driving or operating heavy equipment while impaired from marijuana should be prohibited.

Most importantly, marijuana smoking is for adults only, and is inappropriate for children. There are many activities in our society that are permissible for adults, but forbidden for children, such as motorcycle riding, skydiving, signing contracts, getting married, drinking alcohol or smoking tobacco. However, we do not condone arresting adults who responsibly engage in these activities in order to dissuade our children from doing so. Nor can we justify arresting adult marijuana smokers on the grounds of sending a "message" to children. Our expectation and hope for young people is that they grow up to be responsible adults, and our obligation to them is to demonstrate what that means. Further information regarding the responsible use of marijuana is available at: http://www.norml.org/index.cfm?Group_ID=3384.

Legalization

NORML supports the eventual development of a legally controlled market for marijuana, where consumers could buy marijuana for personal use from a safe legal source. This policy, generally known as legalization, exists on various levels in a handful of European countries like The Netherlands and Switzerland, both of which enjoy lower rates of adolescent marijuana use than the U.S. Such a system would reduce many of the problems presently associated with the prohibition of marijuana, including the crime, corruption and violence associated with a "black market."