

A Brief History of the Drug War

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Many currently illegal drugs, such as marijuana, opium, coca, and psychedelics have been used for thousands of years for both medical and spiritual purposes.

The Early Stages of Drug Prohibition

Why are some drugs legal and other drugs illegal today? It's not based on any scientific assessment of the relative risks of these drugs – but it has everything to do with who is associated with these drugs.

The first anti-opium laws in the 1870s were directed at Chinese immigrants. The first anti-cocaine laws, in the South in the early 1900s, were directed at black men. The first anti-marijuana laws, in the Midwest and the Southwest in the 1910s and 20s, were directed at Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans. Today, Latino and especially black communities are still subject to wildly disproportionate drug enforcement and sentencing practices.

Nixon and the Generation Gap

In the 1960s, as drugs became symbols of youthful rebellion, social upheaval, and political dissent, the government halted scientific research to evaluate their medical safety and efficacy.

In June 1971, President Nixon declared a “war on drugs.” He dramatically increased the size and presence of federal drug control agencies, and pushed through measures such as mandatory sentencing and no-knock warrants. Nixon temporarily placed marijuana in Schedule One, the most restrictive category of drugs, pending review by a commission he appointed led by Republican Pennsylvania Governor Raymond Shafer. In 1972, the commission

unanimously recommended decriminalizing the possession and distribution of marijuana for personal use. Nixon ignored the report and rejected its recommendations.

Between 1973 and 1977, however, eleven states decriminalized marijuana possession. In January 1977, President Jimmy Carter was inaugurated on a campaign platform that included marijuana decriminalization. In October 1977, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to decriminalize possession of up to an ounce of marijuana for personal use.

Within just a few years, though, the tide had shifted. Proposals to decriminalize marijuana were abandoned as parents became increasingly concerned about high rates of teen marijuana use. Marijuana was ultimately caught up in a broader cultural backlash against the perceived permissiveness of the 1970s.

The 1980s and 90s: Drug Hysteria and Skyrocketing Incarceration Rates

The presidency of Ronald Reagan marked the start of a long period of skyrocketing rates of incarceration, largely thanks to his unprecedented expansion of the drug war. The number of people behind bars for nonviolent drug law offenses increased from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997.

Public concern about illicit drug use built throughout the 1980s, largely due to media portrayals of people addicted to the smokeable form of cocaine dubbed “crack.” Soon after Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, his wife, Nancy Reagan, began a highly-publicized anti-drug campaign, coining the slogan "Just Say No." This set the stage for the zero tolerance policies implemented in the mid-to-late 1980s. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, who believed that “casual drug users should be taken out and shot,” founded the DARE drug education program, which was

quickly adopted nationwide despite the lack of evidence of its effectiveness. The increasingly harsh drug policies also blocked the expansion of syringe access programs and other harm reduction policies to reduce the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

In the late 1980s, a political hysteria about drugs led to the passage of draconian penalties in Congress and state legislatures that rapidly increased the prison population. In 1985, the proportion of Americans polled who saw drug abuse as the nation's "number one problem" was just 2-6 percent. The figure grew through the remainder of the 1980s until, in September 1989, it reached a remarkable 64 percent – one of the most intense fixations by the American public on any issue in polling history. Within less than a year, however, the figure plummeted to less than 10 percent, as the media lost interest. The draconian policies enacted during the hysteria remained, however, and continued to result in escalating levels of arrests and incarceration.

Although Bill Clinton advocated for treatment instead of incarceration during his 1992 presidential campaign, after his first few months in the White House he reverted to the drug war strategies of his Republican predecessors by continuing to escalate the drug war. Notoriously, Clinton rejected a U.S. Sentencing Commission recommendation to eliminate the disparity between crack and powder cocaine sentences. He also rejected, with the encouragement of drug czar General Barry McCaffrey, health secretary Donna Shalala's advice to end the federal ban on funding for syringe access programs. Yet, a month before leaving office, Clinton asserted in a Rolling Stone interview that "we really need a re-examination of our entire policy on imprisonment" of people who use drugs, and said that marijuana use "should be decriminalized."

At the height of the drug war hysteria in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a movement emerged seeking a new approach to drug

policy. In 1987, Arnold Trebach and Kevin Zeese founded the Drug Policy Foundation – describing it as the “loyal opposition to the war on drugs.” Prominent conservatives such as William Buckley and Milton Friedman had long advocated for ending drug prohibition, as had civil libertarians such as longtime ACLU Executive Director Ira Glasser. In the late 1980s they were joined by Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke, Federal Judge Robert Sweet, Princeton professor Ethan Nadelmann, and other activists, scholars and policymakers. In 1994, Nadelmann founded The Lindesmith Center as the first U.S. project of George Soros’ Open Society Institute. In 2000, the growing Center merged with the Drug Policy Foundation to create the Drug Policy Alliance.

The Pendulum is Shifting – Slowly – Toward Sensible Drug Policy

George W. Bush arrived in the White House as the drug war was running out of steam – yet he allocated more money than ever to it. His drug czar, John Walters, zealously focused on marijuana and launched a major campaign to promote student drug testing. While rates of illicit drug use remained constant, overdose fatalities rose rapidly. The era of George W. Bush also witnessed the rapid escalation of the militarization of domestic drug law enforcement. By the end of Bush's term, there were about 40,000 paramilitary-style SWAT raids on Americans every year – mostly for nonviolent drug law offenses, often misdemeanors. While federal reform mostly stalled under Bush, state-level reforms finally began to slow the growth of the drug war.

Politicians now routinely admit to having used marijuana, and even cocaine, when they were younger. When Michael Bloomberg was questioned during his 2001 mayoral campaign about whether he had ever used marijuana, he said, "You bet I did – and I enjoyed it." Barack Obama also candidly discussed his prior cocaine and

marijuana use: "When I was a kid, I inhaled frequently – that was the point."

The assault on American citizens, however, has persisted. Bloomberg oversaw a higher rate of low-level marijuana arrests than any mayor in New York City history. And Obama, despite advocating for reforms – such as reducing the crack/powder sentencing disparity, ending the ban on federal funding for syringe access programs, and supporting state medical marijuana laws – has yet to shift drug control funding to a health-based approach.

Progress is inevitably slow but there is unprecedented momentum behind drug policy reform right now. We look forward to a future where drug policies are shaped by science and compassion rather than political hysteria.

The Injustice of Marijuana Arrests

Jesse Wegman

The New York Times

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America's four-decade war on drugs is responsible for many casualties, but the criminalization of marijuana has been perhaps the most destructive part of that war. The toll can be measured in dollars — billions of which are thrown away each year in the aggressive enforcement of pointless laws. It can be measured in years — whether wasted behind bars or stolen from a child who grows up fatherless. And it can be measured in lives — those damaged if not destroyed by the shockingly harsh consequences that can follow even the most minor offenses.

In October 2010, Bernard Noble, a 45-year-old trucker and father of seven with two previous nonviolent offenses, was stopped on a New Orleans street with a small amount of marijuana in his pocket. His sentence: more than 13 years.

At least he will be released. Jeff Mizanskey, a Missouri man, was arrested in December 1993, for participating (unknowingly, he said) in the purchase of a five-pound brick of marijuana. Because he had two prior nonviolent marijuana convictions, he was sentenced to life without parole.

Outrageously long sentences are only part of the story. The hundreds of thousands of people who are arrested each year but do not go to jail also suffer; their arrests stay on their records for years, crippling their prospects for jobs, loans, housing and benefits. These are disproportionately people of color, with marijuana criminalization hitting black communities the hardest.

Meanwhile, police departments that presumably have far more important things to do waste an enormous amount of time and taxpayer money chasing a drug that two states have already legalized and that a majority of Americans believe should be legal everywhere.

A Costly, Futile Strategy

The absurdity starts on the street, with a cop and a pair of handcuffs. As the war on drugs escalated through the 1980s and 1990s, so did the focus on common, low-level offenses — what became known as “broken windows” policing. In New York City, where the strategy was introduced and remains popular today, the police made fewer than 800 marijuana arrests in 1991. In 2010, they made more than 59,000.

Nationwide, the numbers are hardly better. From 2001 to 2010, the police made more than 8.2 million marijuana arrests; almost nine in 10 were for possession alone. In 2011, there were more arrests for marijuana possession than for all violent crimes put together.

The costs of this national obsession, in both money and time, are astonishing. Each year, enforcing laws on possession costs more than \$3.6 billion, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. It can take a police officer many hours to arrest and book a suspect. That person will often spend a night or more in the local jail, and be in court multiple times to resolve the case. The public-safety payoff for all this effort is meager at best: According to a 2012 Human Rights Watch report that tracked 30,000 New Yorkers with no prior convictions when they were arrested for marijuana possession, 90 percent had no subsequent felony convictions. Only 3.1 percent committed a violent offense.

The strategy is also largely futile. After three decades, criminalization has not affected general usage; about 30 million

Americans use marijuana every year. Meanwhile, police forces across the country are strapped for cash, and the more resources they devote to enforcing marijuana laws, the less they have to go after serious, violent crime. According to F.B.I. data, more than half of all violent crimes nationwide, and four in five property crimes, went unsolved in 2012.

The Racial Disparity

The sheer volume of law enforcement resources devoted to marijuana is bad enough. What makes the situation far worse is racial disparity. Whites and blacks use marijuana at roughly the same rates; on average, however, blacks are 3.7 times more likely than whites to be arrested for possession, according to a comprehensive 2013 report by the A.C.L.U.

In Iowa, blacks are 8.3 times more likely to be arrested, and in the worst-offending counties in the country, they are up to 30 times more likely to be arrested. The war on drugs aims its firepower overwhelmingly at African-Americans on the street, while white users smoke safely behind closed doors.

Only about 6 percent of marijuana cases lead to a felony conviction; the rest are often treated as misdemeanors resulting in fines or probation, if the charges aren't dismissed completely. Even so, every arrest ends up on a person's record, whether or not it leads to prosecution and conviction. Particularly in poorer minority neighborhoods, where young men are more likely to be outside and repeatedly targeted by law enforcement, these arrests accumulate. Before long a person can have an extensive "criminal history" that consists only of marijuana misdemeanors and dismissed cases. That criminal history can then influence the severity of punishment for a future offense, however insignificant. While the number of people behind bars solely for possessing or selling marijuana seems relatively small — 20,000 to 30,000 by the

most recent estimates, or roughly 1 percent of America's 2.4 million inmates — that means nothing to people, like Jeff Mizanskey, who are serving breathtakingly long terms because their records contained minor previous offenses. Nor does it mean anything to the vast majority of these inmates who have no history of violence (about nine in 10, according to a 2006 study). And as with arrests, the racial disparity is vast: Blacks are more than 10 times as likely as whites to go to prison for drug offenses. For those on probation or parole for any offense, a failed drug test on its own can lead to prison time — which means, again, that people can be put behind bars for smoking marijuana.

Even if a person never goes to prison, the conviction itself is the tip of the iceberg. In a majority of states, marijuana convictions — including those resulting from guilty pleas — can have lifelong consequences for employment, education, immigration status and family life.

A misdemeanor conviction can lead to, among many other things, the revocation of a professional license; the suspension of a driver's license; the inability to get insurance, a mortgage or other bank loans; the denial of access to public housing; and the loss of student financial aid.

In some states, a felony conviction can result in a lifetime ban on voting, jury service, or eligibility for public benefits like food stamps. People can be fired from their jobs because of a marijuana arrest. Even if a judge eventually throws the case out, the arrest record is often available online for a year, free for any employer to look up.

Correcting an Old Inequity

As recently as the mid-1970s, politicians and the public generally agreed that marijuana abuse was handled better by treatment than by

prosecution and incarceration. Jimmy Carter ran for president and won while supporting decriminalization. But that view lost out as the war on drugs broadened and intensified, sweeping marijuana along with it.

In recent years, public acceptance of marijuana has grown significantly. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia now permit some form of medical marijuana, and Colorado and Washington fully legalized it for recreational use in 2012. And yet even as “ganjapreneurs” scramble to take economic advantage, thousands of people remain behind bars, or burdened by countless collateral punishments that prevent them from full and active membership in society.

In a March interview, Michelle Alexander, a law professor whose book, “The New Jim Crow,” articulated the drug war’s deeper costs to black men in particular, noted the cruel paradox at play in Colorado and Washington. She pointed to “40 years of impoverished black kids getting prison time for selling weed, and their families and futures destroyed,” and said, “Now, white men are planning to get rich doing precisely the same thing?”

As pioneers in legalization, those two states should set a further example by providing relief to people convicted of crimes that are no longer crimes, including overturning convictions. A recent ruling by a Colorado appeals court overturned two 2011 convictions because of the changed law, and the state’s Legislature has enacted laws in the last two years to give courts more power to seal records of drug convictions and to make it easier for defendants to get jobs and housing after a conviction. These are both important steps into an uncharted future.

In Debate Over Legalizing Marijuana, Disagreement Over Drug's Dangers

Pew Research Center

April 14, 2015

Public opinion about legalizing marijuana, while little changed in the past few years, has undergone a dramatic long-term shift. A new survey finds that 53% favor the legal use of marijuana, while 44% are opposed. As recently as 2006, just 32% supported marijuana legalization, while nearly twice as many (60%) were opposed.

Millennials (currently 18-34) have been in the forefront of this change: 68% favor legalizing marijuana use, by far the highest percentage of any age cohort. But across all generations –except for the Silent Generation (ages 70-87) – support for legalization has risen sharply over the past decade.

The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center, conducted March 25-29 among 1,500 adults, finds that supporters of legalizing the use of marijuana are far more likely than opponents to say they have changed their mind on this issue.

Among the public overall, 30% say they support legalizing marijuana use and have always felt that way, while 21% have changed their minds; they say there was a time when they thought it should be illegal. By contrast, 35% say they oppose legalization and have always felt that way; just 7% have changed their minds from supporting to opposing legalization.

When asked, in their own words, *why* they favor or oppose legalizing marijuana, people on opposite sides of the issue offer

very different perspectives. But a common theme is the danger posed by marijuana: Supporters of legalization mention its perceived health benefits, or see it as no more dangerous than other drugs. To opponents, it is a dangerous drug, one that inflicts damage on people and society more generally.

The most frequently cited reasons for supporting the legalization of marijuana are its medicinal benefits (41%) and the belief that marijuana is no worse than other drugs (36%) –with many explicitly mentioning that they think it is no more dangerous than alcohol or cigarettes.

With four states and Washington, D.C. having passed measures to permit the use of marijuana for personal use, 27% of supporters say legalization would lead to improved regulation of marijuana and increased tax revenues. About one-in-ten (12%) cite the costs and problems of enforcing marijuana laws or say simply that people should be free to use marijuana (9%).

Why Should Marijuana Be Legal? Voices of Supporters

Main reason you support legalizing use of marijuana...

“It is not as harmful as alcohol. It also helps medical conditions as a more natural substitute to pharmaceuticals.” *Female, 46*

“My grandson was diagnosed with epilepsy a year ago and it has been proven that it helps with the seizures.” *Female, 69*

“I think crime would be lower if they legalized marijuana. It would put the drug dealers out of business.” *Female, 62*

“Because people should be allowed to have control over their body and not have the government intervene in that.” *Male, 18*

“I think that we would have more control over it by allowing a federal agency to tax and regulate it like alcohol.” *Male, 25*

The most frequently mentioned reason why people oppose legalization is that marijuana generally hurts society and is bad for individuals (43% say this). And while many supporters of legalization say that marijuana is less dangerous than other drugs, 30% of opponents have the opposite view: They point to the dangers of marijuana, including the possibility of abuse and addiction.

About one-in-five opponents of legalization (19%) say marijuana is illegal and needs to be policed, 11% say it is a gateway to harder drugs and 8% say it is especially harmful to young people. A small share of opponents (7%) say that while the recreational use of marijuana should be illegal, they do not object to legalizing medical marijuana.

Why Should Marijuana Be Illegal? Voices of Opponents

Main reason you oppose legalizing use of marijuana...

“It’s a drug and it has considerable side effects. It should not be used recreationally, only for medicinal use.” *Female, 20*

“It’s a drug that makes you stupid. It affects your judgment and motor skills and in the long term it makes you lazy.” *Male, 52*

“It gets too many people on drugs. It would put too many drugs on the street, we don’t need that.” *Male, 84*

“I’m thinking of my child. I don’t want her to try this. I know it’s not good for her health or brain.” *Female, 33*

“We have enough addictive things that are already legal. We don’t need another one.” *Male, 42*

Current Opinion on Legalizing Marijuana

The pattern of opinion about legalizing marijuana has changed little in recent years. Beyond the wide generation gap in support for legalization, there continue to be demographic and partisan differences.

Majorities of blacks (58%) and whites (55%) favor legalizing marijuana, compared with just 40% of Hispanics. Men (57% favor) continue to be more likely than women (49%) to support legalization.

Nearly six-in-ten Democrats (59%) favor legalizing the use of marijuana, as do 58% of independents. That compares with just 39% of Republicans.

Both parties are ideologically divided over legalizing marijuana. Conservative Republicans oppose legalizing marijuana by roughly two-to-one (65% to 32%); moderate and liberal Republicans are divided (49% favor legalization, 50% are opposed).

Among Democrats, 75% of liberals say the use of marijuana should be legal compared with half (50%) of conservative and moderate Democrats.

Views of Legalizing Marijuana, 1969-2015

This interactive shows public opinion on legalizing marijuana since 1969.

Explore trends by gender, generation, and partisanship.

Whites and Blacks Favor Legalizing Marijuana; Hispanics Are Opposed

% saying use of marijuana should be ...

	Legal %	Illegal %	DK %
Total	53	44	3=100
Men	57	40	3=100
Women	49	48	3=100
White	55	42	3=100
Black	58	41	1=100
Hispanic	40	58	2=100
Millennial (18-34)	68	29	3=100
Gen X (35-50)	52	45	4=100
Boomer (51-69)	50	47	3=100
Silent (70-87)	29	68	3=100

Other Opinions: Federal Enforcement of Marijuana Laws

The new survey also finds that as some states have legalized marijuana – placing them at odds with the federal prohibition against marijuana – a majority of Americans (59%) say that the federal government should not enforce laws in states that allow marijuana use; 37% say that they should enforce these laws. Views on federal enforcement of marijuana laws are unchanged since the question was first asked two years ago.

In contrast to overall attitudes about the legal use of marijuana, there are only modest differences in views across partisan groups: 64% of independents, 58% of Democrats and 54% of Republicans say that the federal government should not enforce federal marijuana laws in states that allow its use.

A substantial majority of those who say marijuana should be legal (78%) do not think the federal government should enforce federal laws in states that allow its use. Among those who think marijuana should be illegal, 59% say there should be federal enforcement in states that allow marijuana use, while 38% say there should not be.

Concerns About Marijuana Use

While most Americans support legalizing marijuana, there are concerns about public use of the drug, if it were to become legal. Overall, 62% say that if marijuana were legal it would bother them if people used it in public; just 33% say this would not bother them. Like overall views of legalizing marijuana, these views have changed little in recent years.

There is less concern about the possibility of a marijuana-related business opening legally in people's own neighborhood: 57% say it would not bother them if a store or business selling marijuana

opened legally in their neighborhood, while 41% say this would bother them.

And just 15% say they would be bothered if people used marijuana in their own homes; 82% say this would not bother them.

As might be expected, there are sharp differences in these concerns between people who favor and oppose legalizing marijuana. A large majority of opponents of marijuana legalization (85%) say they would be bothered by public use of the drug, if it were legal; about four-in-ten supporters (43%) also say they would be bothered by this. On the other hand, a majority of opponents of legalization (65%) say they would not be bothered if people used marijuana in their own homes; virtually all supporters of legalization (97%) would not be bothered by this.

And while 77% of those who oppose legalizing marijuana say, if it were legal, they would be bothered if a store or business selling marijuana opened in their neighborhood, just 12% of supporters of legalization say this would bother them.

About Half Say They Have Tried Marijuana

Have You Ever Tried Marijuana?

	June 2003	March 2010	March 2013	Feb 2014	March 2015
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	38	40	48	47	49
No	61	58	51	52	51
Don't know	1	2	1	1	1
	100	100	100	100	100

Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015.
 Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

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Overall, 49% say they have ever tried marijuana, while 51% say they have never done this. Self-reported experience with marijuana has shown no change over the past two years, but is higher than it was early last decade: In 2003, 38% said they had tried marijuana before, while 61% said they had not.

About a quarter of those who have tried marijuana (12% of the public overall) say they have used marijuana in the past year. Similar percentages reported using marijuana in the prior 12 months in two previous surveys, conducted in February 2014 and March 2013.

Men (56%) are 15 points more likely than women (41%) to say they have ever tried marijuana.

About half of whites (52%) and blacks (50%) say they have tried marijuana before. Among Hispanics, 36% say they have tried marijuana, while 63% say they have not.

Across generations, 59% of Baby Boomers say they've tried marijuana before; this compares with 47% of Generation Xers and 52% of Millennials. Among those in the Silent generation, only 19% say they have ever tried marijuana. Nearly a quarter of Millennials (23%) say they have used the drug in the past year, the highest share of any age cohort.

There is little difference in the shares of Democrats (48%) and Republicans (45%) who say they've tried marijuana. However, there are differences within each party by ideology. By a 61%-39% margin, most conservative Republicans say they have never tried marijuana. Among moderate and liberal Republicans, about as many say they have (52%) as have not (48%) tried marijuana before.

Among Democrats, liberals (58%) are more likely than conservatives and moderates (42%) to say they've tried marijuana.

While a majority of those who say marijuana should be legal say they've tried the drug before (65%), 34% of those who support legalization say they've never tried marijuana. Among those who say marijuana should be illegal, 29% say they have tried it before, while 71% say they have not.

Women Less Likely Than Men to Say They Have Tried Marijuana

Have you ever tried marijuana/used in past year?

	Yes, ever %	Yes, in past year* %	No, never %
Total	49	12	51
Men	56	17	43
Women	41	8	58
White	52	13	48
Black	50	9	49
Hispanic	36	11	63
Millennial (18-34)	52	23	48
Gen X (35-50)	47	9	52
Boomer (51-69)	59	9	40
Silent (70-87)	19	2	81
College grad+	44	9	55
Some college	53	13	46
HS or less	48	14	51
Republican	45	12	55
Conservative Rep	39	6	61
Mod/Lib Rep	52	20	48
Independent	52	13	46
Democrat	48	11	51
Cons/Mod Dem	42	10	58
Liberal Dem	58	14	40
<i>Marijuana should be ...</i>			
Legal	65	22	34
Illegal	29	1	71

Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

* 'Yes, ever' column includes those who have used in past year. Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

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Legalize Pot? You Must Be High

Marty Nemko

Time

November 7, 2014

The case for making marijuana, alcohol and tobacco illegal

America just took three steps toward nationally legal marijuana: Oregon, Alaska, and D.C. Should we be lighting up a celebratory doobie? I don't think so.

Children

The nation is wringing its hands about its student achievement. In the latest international comparison, as I cited in a recent TIME article, the U.S. finished below average among the 34 OECD nations, despite being No. 1 in the world in per-student spending. Yet we're legalizing pot, which may cause far greater damage than once thought:

- A 2014 Harvard/Northwestern study found “Young adults who used marijuana only recreationally showed significant abnormalities in two key brain regions that are important in emotion and motivation.”
- A 2013 study from the University of Maryland School of Medicine published in the journal *Neuropsychopharmacology* found that “Regular marijuana use during adolescence, but not adulthood, may permanently impair cognition and increase the risk for psychiatric diseases, such as schizophrenia.” The follow-up 2014 study found that using marijuana as a teen reduces gray matter in the parts of the brain associated with motivational, emotional and affective processing.

- A 2014 National Institute on Drug Abuse report summarized a large, long-term Duke University study: “People who began smoking marijuana heavily in their teens lost an average of 8 points in IQ between age 13 and age 38. Importantly, the lost cognitive abilities were not fully restored in those who quit smoking marijuana as adults.”

And the risks are not just to mental health but to physical:

- A 2014 study published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* found that marijuana causes heart attacks and diseases in the arteries, even among the young.
- A 2014 study found that marijuana use during pregnancy can impede development of the baby’s brain.
- A 2013 review of scientific literature by Canada’s public health agency reported that “a number of *in vitro* studies have provided strong evidence that smoke from burning cannabis is carcinogenic.”
- All that on top of a mountain of scary data reported not by some conservative group, but by the Obama Administration.

Pot advocates try to dismiss all that by pointing out that marijuana is being legalized only for adults. But as with alcohol, wider availability filters down to kids. And with pot legal for adults, the black market will likely redirect its efforts to teens, where, as cited, the damage of marijuana use is greater and more irreversible.

There’s already evidence of that. Dr. Christian Thurstone, Colorado Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Society president and youth addiction researcher at the University of Colorado-Denver, reported that his clinic has been “inundated with young people reporting for marijuana-addiction treatment. Every day, we

see the acute effects of the policy of legalization. And our kids are paying a great price.”

At Work

Then there’s our workforce. Despite the moderate unemployment rate, people are having an ever harder time finding a decent job, as I pointed out in a previous TIME article. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the labor participation rate, the percentage of adults 16 to 64 that are employed or actively looking for work, is 62.8%, within 0.1% of the lowest point since early 1978. And those who are working are, on average, making less. An analysis of government data on income and poverty released in September found that “After adjusting for inflation, U.S. median household income is still 8 percent lower than it was before the recession, 9 percent lower than at its peak in 1999.”

Legalize pot and you have a workforce that is worth not more, but less—more likely to suffer from the poor memory, reduced motivation and emotional problems cited above. Kevin Sabet, former Obama White House drug policy advisor, wrote on CNN.com about a long list of problems that have occurred since legalization in Colorado, including “Employers...reporting more workplace incidents involving marijuana use.” Pot advocates claim that legalization will create jobs. It will cost jobs.

Those are statistics. Their impact is made more real with human stories. For example, I attended a party at which one attendee had worked on the assembly line in the Ford plant in Dearborn, Michigan. He said that workers would routinely be high on marijuana and pull such pranks as deliberately dropping a bolt into a car’s axle so that, when driven, the car would rattle. Why would

they do that? Because the high workers thought it would be amusing to see if they could frustrate the Quality Assurance Team, which would hear a rattle in the car and it would take them hours to figure out what caused it. Pot did.

The human costs

Apart from the toll on businesses and consumers, pot imposes enormous human costs beyond measurable disease.

As a career counselor in the San Francisco Bay Area—epicenter of “medical” marijuana use—I’ve had many clients who need to find a job but are unmotivated and have poor memory. When I ask if they smoke or have smoked a lot of pot, their answer is usually yes.

Not only are such people likely to be un- or underemployed, their families must live with the consequences of poor motivation, memory and psychological functioning, which also often translates to being more difficult to live with: unwilling to keep their home clean, poor parenting, etc.

Legal pot doesn’t yield tax dollars. It costs tax dollars.

When unable to counter the above arguments against legalization, pot activists often shift to arguing that legalization will increase tax revenues. But the aforementioned Obama Administration report states that the additional revenue would be far outweighed by the increased health care costs. For example, that report summarizes a Centers for Disease Control-funded study: “The cost to society of alcohol alone is estimated to be more than 15 times the revenue gained by their taxation.”

What sorts of costs? Apart from the increase in the cost of treating physical and mental illness cited above, there's the increase in vehicle accidents. A study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that 18 percent of drivers in fatal accidents tested positive for a non-alcoholic mind-altering drug, mainly marijuana. And this study found almost twice as many drivers in fatal car accidents tested positive versus a control group. And since legalization in Washington, data adapted from the Washington State Patrol and Washington State Toxicologist summarized by Project Sam, "a nonpartisan alliance of lawmakers, scientists and other concerned citizens," found that in 2013, the percentage of vehicle accidents in which the driver tested positive for marijuana rose 40%. Contrast that with the two years before legalization: From 2011-2012, there was only a 0.7% increase, and from 2010-2011 also a 0.7% increase.

But what about medicinal use?

To the extent that marijuana is a medicinal drug of choice, it can be treated like any other prescription medicine. If a physician wants to prescribe it, the prescription can be filled at a pharmacy. No need to make it available over-the-counter for recreational use. After all, just because morphine has medical uses doesn't mean it should be bought like any other retail item.

Make pot, alcohol and tobacco illegal.

Freedom is not an absolute good. It is a good that should, on a case-by-case basis, be weighed against the liabilities. For example, nearly everyone accepts these restrictions of freedom because of the benefits: We force people to pay more for cars by requiring that vehicles have anti-pollution devices, seat belts and airbags. We

force the public to pay more for meat by requiring safety standards. We force people to not take a newly developed medication until it undergoes extensive testing for safety and efficacy.

When weighing the benefits and liabilities of marijuana, alcohol and tobacco, it seems clear that an out-and-out ban, while politically infeasible, is what government would enact if it truly cared about its residents. Like millions of Americans, I enjoy having a drink or even sometimes three. I have smoked pot. But I would gladly give them up for the societal benefit: less disease and fewer car accidents, more fully functioning people, a more employable work force and, in turn, better products and services, plus the richer lives people would lead.

Yes, prohibition would still leave a black market, but the perfect is the enemy of the good. When alcohol was made illegal during Prohibition, alcohol use dropped by 30% to 40%. (Here is the original study.) Decreasing marijuana and alcohol use 30% to 40% would yield greater benefit than almost any policy we could enact. Yet we're hurtling in the opposite direction. We're on our way to soon being able to get high legally anywhere in the U.S. Excuse me, I need a drink.

War on drugs a trillion-dollar failure

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CNN

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In 1925, H. L. Mencken wrote an impassioned plea: "Prohibition has not only failed in its promises but actually created additional serious and disturbing social problems throughout society. There is not less drunkenness in the Republic but more. There is not less crime, but more. ... The cost of government is not smaller, but vastly greater. Respect for law has not increased, but diminished."

This week marks the 79th anniversary of the repeal of Prohibition in December 1933, but Mencken's plea could easily apply to today's global policy on drugs.

We could learn a thing or two by looking at what Prohibition brought to the United States: an increase in consumption of hard liquor, organized crime taking over legal production and distribution and widespread anger with the federal government.

News: Pot smokers enter legal limbo in Washington, Colorado

Here we are, four decades after Richard Nixon declared the war on drugs in 1971 and \$1 trillion spent since then. What do we have to show for it?

The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world, with about 2.3 million behind bars. More than half a million of those people are incarcerated for a drug law violation. What a waste of young lives.

In business, if one of our companies is failing, we take steps to identify and solve the problem. What we don't do is continue failing strategies that cost huge sums of money and exacerbate the problem. Rather than continuing on the disastrous path of the war

on drugs, we need to look at what works and what doesn't in terms of real evidence and data.

Opinion: The end of the war on marijuana

The facts are overwhelming. If the global drug trade were a country, it would have one of the top 20 economies in the world. In 2005, the United Nations estimated the global illegal drug trade is worth more than \$320 billion. It also estimates there are 230 million illegal drug users in the world, yet 90% of them are not classified as problematic.

In the United States, if illegal drugs were taxed at rates comparable to those on alcohol and tobacco, they would yield \$46.7 billion in tax revenue. A Cato study says legalizing drugs would save the U.S. about \$41 billion a year in enforcing the drug laws.

Have U.S. drug laws reduced drug use? No. The U.S. is the No. 1 nation in the world in illegal drug use. As with Prohibition, banning alcohol didn't stop people drinking -- it just stopped people obeying the law.

About 40,000 people were in U.S. jails and prisons for drug crimes in 1980, compared with more than 500,000 today. Excessively long prison sentences and locking up people for small drug offenses contribute greatly to this ballooning of the prison population. It also represents racial discrimination and targeting disguised as drug policy. People of color are no more likely to use or sell illegal drugs than white people -- yet from 1980 to 2007, blacks were arrested for drug law violations at rates 2.8 to 5.5 times higher than white arrest rates.

Prohibition failed when the American people spoke up and demanded its repeal. Today, the American people are showing their dissatisfaction with the war on drugs by voting for change, often in the face of federal law.

Colorado and Washington recently became the first U.S. states to legalize recreational use of marijuana. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia allow the medical use of marijuana, and 74% of Americans support alternatives to locking people up for marijuana possession.

How would our society, our communities and daily lives improve if we took the money we use running a police and prison state and put it into education and health? Treating drugs as a health issue could save billions, improve public health and help us better control violence and crime in our communities. Hundreds of thousands of people have died from overdoses and drug-related diseases, including HIV and hepatitis C, because they didn't have access to cost-effective, life-saving solutions.

A Pew study says it costs the U.S. an average of \$30,000 a year to incarcerate an inmate, but the nation spends only an average \$11,665 per public school student. The future of our nations and our children should be our priority. We should be helping people addicted to drugs break their habits rather than putting users in prison.

When it comes to drugs, we should focus on the goals we agree on: protecting our kids, protecting public safety and preventing and treating drug abuse and addiction. To help unlock barriers to drug reform, last June, I joined the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which is bringing global leadership to drug reform to make fact-based research public and draw attention to successful alternative approaches.

Opinion: Mr. President, fix our broken drug policy

As part of this work, a new documentary, "Breaking the Taboo," narrated by Oscar award-winning actor Morgan Freeman and produced by my son Sam Branson's indie Sundog Pictures, followed the commission's attempts to break the political taboo over the war on drugs. The film exposes the biggest failure of

global policy in the past 40 years and features revealing contributions from global leaders, including former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter.

It is time we broke the taboo and opened up the debate about the war on drugs. We need alternatives that focus on education, health, taxation and regulation.

If you ignore a serious problem, refuse to debate it and hope it will go away all by itself, you are very naive. The war on drugs has failed. It's time to confront the issue head on.