

## **Marijuana Legalization Means Greater Use Among Teens**

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Let me begin by acknowledging that the sky will not fall next July once the adult recreational use of marijuana becomes legal in Oregon.

In fact, the new voter-approved law reforms criminal justice practices relating to marijuana possession, and directs twenty-five percent of the revenue from the marijuana tax to drug education and treatment, and forty percent of the revenue to public schools. These are welcome things, the cognitive dissonance of drug-built drug-free schools notwithstanding.

But as Oregonians celebrate their coming high summer, we must also prepare for the after-party, the coming higher numbers of teens using and becoming addicted to marijuana.

Legalization means greater use among teens as the perception of risk drops. Legalization tells kids “marijuana is not a big deal”. Studies have already confirmed this phenomenon: only forty percent of American teens now report perceiving “great risk” to smoking marijuana once or twice a week. Already on the rise, marijuana use among teens will surely accelerate with increasing societal normalization and glamorization.

Legalization also means greater access, leading more kids to use, hijacking their potential success in school and in life. As with alcohol, wider availability filters down to kids. Make no mistake, kids will enjoy greater access to marijuana through adult siblings, adult acquaintances, and through some parents’ unsecured stockpiling of marijuana and THC-infused confections.

And for the truly determined teen user, there will remain the black market. It’s naïve to think that the black market will simply fade with legalization. Instead, with pot legal for adults, it will likely redirect its efforts to teens, where the damage of marijuana use is greater and more irreversible.

Proponents have argued that teens already have access to marijuana, and “they’re going to get it anyway, just look at alcohol”. Yes, let us indeed look at alcohol: it is advertised, glamorized, and its use and abuse portrayed by the popular media as humorous and necessary for a good time. As a result, half of American teens claim to have used alcohol – and one in four admit to binge drinking – within the past month.

Oregonians must dispel themselves of any notion that marijuana is a harmless drug, and rid themselves the false comfort of marijuana being less harmful than alcohol. The argument is not between alcohol and marijuana. Teens aren’t deciding between the two. Many more will now use both. And while the dangers of alcohol addiction and abuse are undeniable, the dangers of marijuana addiction and abuse remain widely denied.

The scientific verdict is in: one in six kids who ever try marijuana will become addicted to the drug, and addiction happens far more quickly than in adults. Each year in the U.S., more kids enter treatment for marijuana dependence than for all other drugs combined. Psychiatrists and youth-addiction clinics in Colorado this year report being inundated with young people reporting for marijuana-addiction treatment.

Also in Colorado, calls to poison-control centers and visits to emergency departments for marijuana-related physical and mental illness have skyrocketed. Kids (and some adults) are experiencing psychotic episodes as they binge on THC-laced cookies, candies, sodas, and ice cream. Many baby boomers and others have a hard time understanding all this, simply because today's marijuana can be so much more potent than the marijuana of yesteryear.

And then there are the significant adverse health, social, learning, and behavioral changes marijuana use can lead to at a crucial time in a young person's development. Problems with memory and learning, thinking and problem solving, concentration, and motivation all interfere with academic achievement, and lead to lower IQ. In other words, marijuana use shrinks not only the brain, but also the number of future opportunities.

Getting high also impairs judgment, which can lead to risky decision making on issues such as school attendance, sex, criminal activity, and driving while impaired, or riding with another impaired teen.

Finally, marijuana is unquestionably a gateway drug. Very few teens use other, more dangerous drugs without first using marijuana.

Oregon voters have spoken. This is not an indictment, but rather a warning, an ex-Boy Scout's caution to "be prepared". All of us must now work even harder to prevent teens from using marijuana and alcohol, and to direct teens immediately to treatment when their use is discovered.

These aren't bad kids, they are our kids, and we must educate them and nurture them, and guide them non-judgmentally towards help and a healthier and brighter future.