

# A Clear and Present Danger

## Marijuana and the Marginalization of Prevention

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Dealing a blow to years of work and recent gains in youth drug prevention, Massachusetts has joined a growing, but still short, list of states to decriminalize marijuana possession. At least that is the intention of some 65 percent of voters checking "Yes" on a ballot initiative that makes possession of an ounce or less of marijuana a civil offense (punishable by a ticket) as opposed to a criminal one. And this on the same day that the same voters approved a ban on greyhound racing.

Protect the dogs but throw the kids under the bus. Go figure.

Indeed, opponents of the ballot initiative – which include state constitutional officers, district attorneys, police chiefs, ministers, school superintendents, and major newspapers – say, "We believe that efforts to legalize drugs of any kind represent the wrong direction for Massachusetts and put our children, our families, and our communities at risk."

For its part, the Committee for Sensible Marijuana Policy, which backed the measure, points proudly to the monetary savings for police departments, never mind the total national economic cost of drug abuse of \$254.8 billion in 2008 or the obvious cost shifting to an already overburdened health care system. For example, Massachusetts' Coalition for Safe Streets says that marijuana is already a primary factor in juvenile ER admissions.

And emergency department episodes involving marijuana almost tripled from 1994 to 2002, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which reports that marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in America. In fact, of all youth ages 12-17 in drug treatment in 2000, nearly 62 percent had a primary marijuana diagnosis.

But dollars don't equal sense in this equation. What really matters is the health and safety of our children.

Marijuana smoke contains 50 to 70 percent more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than does tobacco smoke, increasing the risk of chronic cough, bronchitis, and emphysema, as well as cancer of the head, neck, and lungs. It also leads to changes in the brain similar to those caused by cocaine and heroin.

In addition, marijuana use affects alertness, concentration, perception, and reaction time, all critical to the safe operation of automobiles.

Yet, alarmingly, SADD research has shown that young people tend to underestimate the dangers of drugged driving, with 15 percent of teen drivers reporting having operated a car under the influence of marijuana.

Other risks, including deteriorating school performance, disrupted relationships, depression, suicide, and crime, can't be overlooked.

Our kids deserve clear, unambiguous messages about the dangers associated with marijuana, the very type of messages that have helped drive down use among Massachusetts high school and middle school students from 50 percent to 41 percent since 2001.

On a national level, annual prevalence of marijuana use has fallen 33 percent among 8<sup>th</sup> graders and 25 percent among 10<sup>th</sup> graders during the same time period.

And that is important because turning back the tide of progress in youth drug prevention is not only a Massachusetts issue, but rather one that threatens kids everywhere – especially with other loosening of restrictions on marijuana use being proposed in Congress.

Some supporters of decriminalization point to statistics showing that relaxed laws have not led to an increase in marijuana use (even though 65 percent of students in the SADD study cited the law as the number one reason why they choose not to use drugs). Interesting considering that SAMHSA reports half the states with the highest percentage of new youth marijuana users have medical marijuana programs.

But debates over the data aside, shouldn't our focus remain on *reducing* use, not on maintaining the status quo?

In *What Americans Need to Know About Marijuana*, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) shoots holes in a series of "myths" that no doubt perpetuate drug use by young people and embolden even caring adults to send the message that

smoking weed is really no big deal. Among them:

- Marijuana is harmless.
- Marijuana is not addictive.
- Youth experimentation with marijuana is inevitable.

In their place, ONDCP advocates for a closer examination of the facts, including the incredibly powerful role that parents can play in keeping their kids drug free by staying involved, setting limits, and enforcing consequences.

The importance of empowered parents in reducing youth drug use cannot be overstated, especially in the face of well-funded state and national campaigns to decriminalize the potent presence of marijuana in too many young lives.

It is, without a doubt, a clear and present danger.

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