

Marijuana Should Be Legalized

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Recently in the news, Michael Phelps, Olympic swimming hero, was caught smoking pot. It cost him millions in endorsement money and hurt his reputation. This news piece brought back the debate about whether or not marijuana (also known as cannabis) should be legalized by the United States. Marijuana should be legalized in the U.S. Marijuana has been proven not to be strongly addictive and not as dangerous as many believe. Legalizing marijuana would help get rid of gangs and put drug trafficking cartels out of business. Economically, the United States would save a lot of money by legalizing marijuana and there are also many medical benefits of the drug.

Knowing some history about marijuana laws is important in understanding why it should be legalized. During the 1930's, there was a lot of negative propaganda about marijuana and its use. "Reefer Madness" was a popular film from 1937 that showed the "violent narcotic's ... soul destroying effects on unwary teens" (Reefer Madness). Because of all the negative press on marijuana, the Marijuana Tax Act was passed by congress in 1938. The Marijuana Tax Act is a federal law, so even if a state decides to de-criminalize the use of cannabis, a person can still be arrested by the federal government (Growing Marijuana Seeds). This has led to confusion, many law-suits, and reluctance by the medical industry to study marijuana. If federal marijuana laws were changed, then there could be more research and fewer lawsuits, which would benefit all citizens.

There are many people apposed to legalizing marijuana for some of the following reasons. Nora Volkow, the Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuses says "The use of marijuana can produce adverse physical, mental, emotional, and behavior changes. ...can impair short-term memory, verbal skills, and judgment...can harm the lungs...the

increasing use of marijuana by very young teens may have a profoundly negative effect upon their development” (National Institute on Drug Abuse). However, overall research done on marijuana’s health effects is inconclusive and usually, if there are negative effects, they are considered mild. Also, the same regulations that are on tobacco and alcohol could prohibit minors from using marijuana. Many people object to marijuana because they say that it is addicting. However, it is only mildly addicting. Two reports, one from the Addiction Research Center and another from the University of California compared addictiveness of heroin, cocaine, nicotine, alcohol, caffeine, and marijuana. Both reports found nicotine to be the most addictive and marijuana to be the least addictive of the drugs studied ([Marijuana](#)). One of the main criticisms of legalizing marijuana is that it is a “gateway” to other more intense drugs. A study in 2002 showed that many students (77%) had tried marijuana but 74% had not used it in the past year and that it did not lead to the use of more dangerous drugs ([Marijuana](#)). Legalizing marijuana is a complicated issue that many people are opposed to, but those reasons do not outweigh the many reasons it should be legal.

By legalizing marijuana, the United States would lessen the impact of illegal drug trafficking and gangs. One raid led by U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and Mexican officials on a marijuana cultivation processing complex found 9,000 tons of marijuana with U.S. street value estimated at \$4 billion (SIRS Research). That money funds a lot of gang activity and continues to keep the drug cartels in business. Legalizing marijuana would take some of the competition out among gangs and drug dealers, making the streets safer. Proquest’s article “Marijuana Legalization Timeline” states that the U.S. Government Accountability Office reports that Mexican drug cartels earned up to \$23

billion from drug sales in 2008 and that the cartels run street distribution gangs in almost every region in the country. Obviously, it is in the illegal drug seller's interest to sell more marijuana, so if it were legal, there might be fewer users encouraged by gangs and pushers. Legalizing marijuana would weaken street gangs and cartels, would lesson crime and hopefully minimize the amount available on the street for underage users.

Another benefit from legalizing cannabis would be the economic rewards from decriminalization. There is a huge cost in the U.S. to prosecuting and punishing offenders. Orange County Superior Court Judge, James Gray thought the state of California would save \$1 billion a year in stopping prosecuting and imprisoning those non-violent offenders ([Time](#), 3/13/2009). In 2005, a study by Jeffrey Allen Miron estimated 6.2 billion yearly would be gained if marijuana were taxed at the same rate as tobacco and alcohol ([Prohibitioncosts.org](#)). The economic benefits from legalizing marijuana led, as reported in the article "Budgetary implications of Marijuana in the United States," more than 530 economists including Nobel prize-winning Milton Friedman to call for the legalization of cannabis ([Prohibitioncosts.org](#)). In these harsh economic times, the United States should be looking for any way to increase their economic strength, and one way to do this would be to legalize marijuana.

There are many medical benefits of marijuana, adding to the reasons why it should be legal. The article "Legalization of Marijuana Info" states that no one has ever died from using marijuana, it is less dangerous than tobacco to one's health and it can replace 10-20 % of prescribed drugs now being used ([Growing Marijuana Seeds](#)). A National Institute on Drug Abuse paper (NIDA) reports that THC is the active ingredient in cannabis and can be useful in treating appetite stimulation, glaucoma, and pain, spastic

muscles from MS, nausea and wasting from AIDS. Some of the health organizations that support legalizing cannabis: The American Academy of Family Physicians, American Nurses Association, American Public Health Association, New England Journal of Medicine, American Cancer Society, and American Medical Association (Prohibitioncosts.org). There are many other medical professionals that favor legalizing medical marijuana that would come in a form that could be smoked, and wouldn't need a prescription for. Currently, some states do allow medical marijuana to be purchased by prescription. However, you can still be arrested for using medical marijuana, because there currently is a federal law banning marijuana use, and can override the state's law. These federal laws are not being enforced, but the many benefits of medical marijuana and the lack of enforcement is another reason why marijuana should be legalized by the United States government.

There are many reasons that marijuana should be legal. It relieves stress, is not fatal, only mildly addictive, has major medical advantages, would lesson crime, and would help the economy. However, there are also those who think that marijuana is a drug that should remain banned. But, those reasons are weak compared to the benefits of legalized marijuana. There is a human cost to punishing non-violent marijuana users. As Steven Dubner said, "While marijuana is, in fact, remarkably free of toxicity, the consequences of annually arresting 300,000 mostly young people were not" (New York Times.) It is wrong that someone like Michael Phelps, or the average, casual pot smoker, can be labeled for life as a drug user and criminal for a substance that should be legal in the United States.

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