



Walls Won't Secure the US-Mexico Border, But Cannabis Legalization Will, Says Think Tank

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President Trump insists that a border wall would inhibit drug smuggling from Mexico into the US, but the statistics don't support his claim. However, legalizing marijuana would take a huge bite out of the illicit drug trade, according to a recent report published by the Cato Institute—a conservative think-tank based in Washington, DC.

"State marijuana legalization starting in 2014 did more to reduce marijuana smuggling than the doubling of Border Patrol agents or the construction of hundreds of miles of border fencing did from 2003 to 2009," the report reads.

Between 2014—when Colorado became the first state to legalize recreational cannabis sales and consumption for adults—and 2018, seizures of cannabis by US Border Patrol has dropped by a massive 78 percent. During this period the average amount of marijuana seized per agent fell from 114 pounds to just 25.

Compare that to the period between 2003 and 2009, when Border Patrol doubled its number of agents and constructed over 600 miles of fencing stretching across the US-Mexico border. Despite spending a lot of tax dollars on the huge increase in surveillance and protection measures along the border, nothing changed. The average amount of cannabis seized per agent remained at 115 pounds for the entire six year period. Only the eventual legalization of marijuana reduced drug trafficking.

The Cato report noted that since illicit cannabis sales began falling after legalization, "other drugs have not entirely substituted for this decline in marijuana. The street value of all drugs seized by the average agent between ports of entry also fell by 70 percent from [fiscal year] 2013 to [fiscal year] 2018."

Legalization of cannabis also hits traffickers where it hurts—their wallet. As cannabis becomes easier to obtain legally in the US, the black market shrinks due to lack of demand, and as a result, the profitability of illicit weed drops. That's not to mention that the Department of Homeland Security concluded in a 2016 report that the department couldn't guarantee that "\$4.2 billion it spends annually on drug controlling activities" helped them achieve their set goals.

"Mexican growers have reported that marijuana prices in Mexico have recently fallen between 50 and 70 percent after US legalizations."

But what about hard drugs like heroin? Would beefing up border security have an impact on restricting access to substances that are far more dangerous than cannabis? That doesn't seem likely either. Because other drugs don't have the same distinct and potent aroma as marijuana, they are easier to conceal and sneak through legal ports of entry instead of trying to illegally cross the the US-Mexico border, says the report.

"By value, CBP seized 87 percent of all hard drugs at ports of entry, not between ports of entry, in 2018. Stated another way, the hard drugs seized at ports of entry were seven times more valuable than those seized between ports of entry."

So building a wall won't prevent heroin from reaching the US because smugglers are using legal entry points to ship it in. So, instead of lengthy government shutdowns, and expensive, ineffective policies, Trump should try curbing the illicit drug trade by legalizing cannabis and helping staff at legal points of entry detect illicit cargo.