



Maryland set to decriminalize marijuana

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April 7, 2014

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley will sign legislation decriminalizing marijuana in his state, the governor's office announced Monday.

The legislation will make Maryland the 17th state to decriminalize marijuana.

O'Malley, often touted as a potential contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, explained his stance in a statement.

"As a young prosecutor, I once thought that decriminalizing the possession of marijuana might undermine the Public Will necessary to combat drug violence and improve public safety," he said. "I now think that decriminalizing possession of marijuana is an acknowledgement of the low priority that our courts, our prosecutors, our police, and the vast majority of citizens already attach to this transgression of public order and public health."

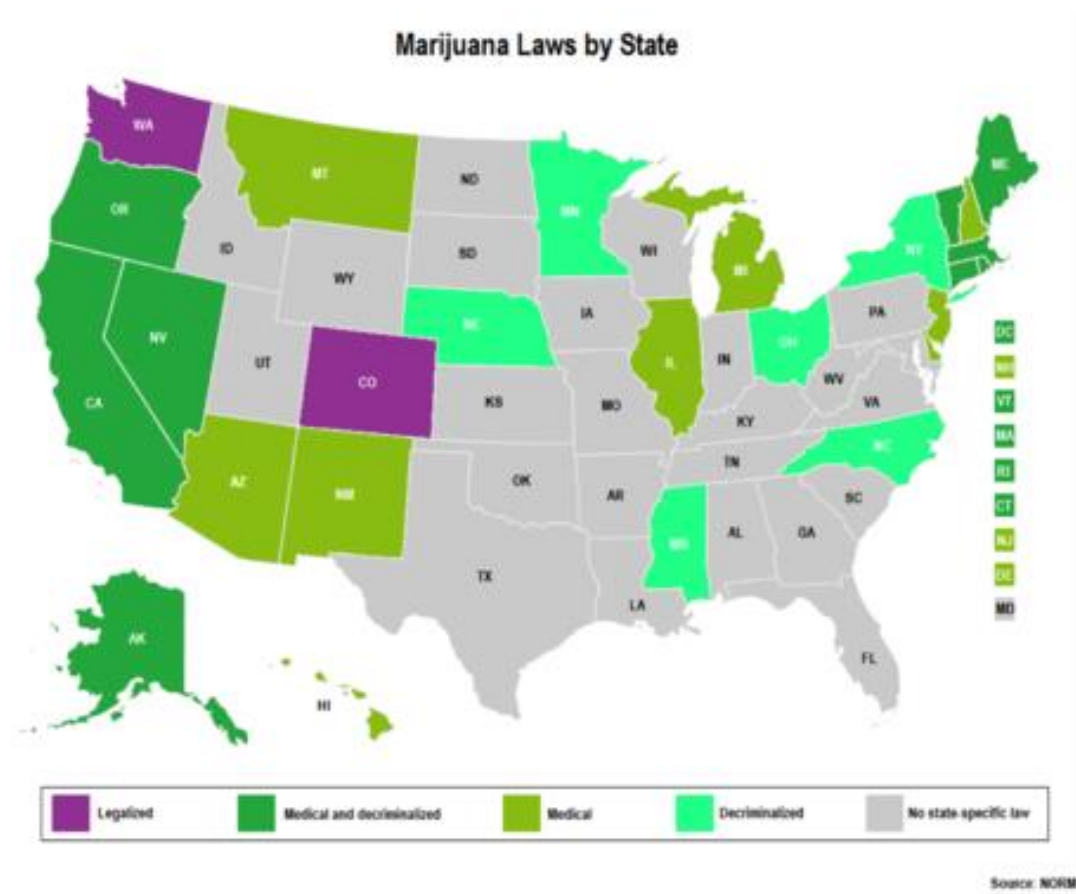
Marijuana decriminalization eliminates criminal penalties, such as extended prison time, for possession of a limited amount of the drug.

Decriminalization laws vary from state to state, but they typically apply to anyone possessing a small amount of marijuana. Whether a small amount means 25 grams or 1 ounce depends on the state's laws.

This doesn't mean that possessing marijuana is legal in places where it's decriminalized. Those caught possessing or selling an amount within decriminalized limits are still fined, usually a few hundred dollars. States with stricter decriminalization laws also attach some jail time, particularly to trafficking.

And those caught with large amounts of marijuana, even in places where the drug is decriminalized, still face criminal penalties.

Marijuana is currently decriminalized in 15 states and the District of Columbia. It is fully legal in Colorado and Washington.



Supporters of decriminalization often point to Portugal as evidence of the policy's success. A 2009 Cato Institute report found drug-related deaths dropped after Portugal decriminalized all drugs, and more drug addicts sought rehabilitation services because the policy removed the fear of arrest.