



## **Marijuana legalization is not driving increases in violent crime**

Paul Armentano

February 22, 2019

Allegations that the regulation of marijuana use and retail sales is responsible for an uptick in violent criminal activity, are not supported by the available evidence. In fact, studies typically show just the opposite to be true.

Specifically, FBI data from Washington state correlates legalization with decreases in violent criminal activity. As reported by The News Tribune in 2017, "Since voters approved Initiative 502, FBI crime statistics show lower rates of violent crime in Washington than before legalization."

A separate analysis of Washington state crime data published by the IZA Institute of Labor Economics similarly reports:

There is evidence ... that the legalization of recreational cannabis enacted in Washington caused a decrease in crime rates. The point estimates for rape, assault, robbery, burglary and theft are all negative. This conclusion is reinforced by the statistical significance of the drop in rapes and thefts. ... Our estimates reveal that the legalization decreased ... both ordinary alcohol and binge alcohol. ... These effects on consumption suggest that one of the mechanisms underlying the reduction in crime may be a substitution away from other drugs ... such as alcohol, which makes consumers more aggressive than if consuming cannabis.

A similar trend emerged in Colorado following legalization. According to a white paper published by the CATO Institute think-tank, "[M]onthly crime rates from Denver, Colorado ... remain essentially constant after 2012 and 2014. ... Other cities in Colorado mirror those findings."

More recently, a 2018 study published in the journal Police Quarterly reported that cannabis legalization is associated with an overall improvement in crime clearance rates. Researchers at Washington State University assessed crime clearance rates in Colorado and Washington in the years immediately prior and immediately following the enactment of adult use legalization. They reported that clearance rates were either flat or decreasing prior to legalization, but then improved significantly following the change in law — particularly with respect to violent crimes and property crimes.

Authors concluded, "Our models show no negative effects of legalization and, instead, indicate that crime clearance rates for at least some types of crime are increasing faster in states that legalized than in those that did not."

Peer-reviewed data also exposes the myth that brick-and-mortar cannabis retailers are likely to be potential crime magnets.

Specifically, a federally-sponsored study assessing medical cannabis dispensaries in Sacramento concluded, "There were no observed cross-sectional associations between the density of medical marijuana dispensaries and either violent or property crime rates in this study."

A 2017 evaluation of marijuana facility operations in Los Angeles reported that dispensary openings were associated with a reduction in incidences of certain types of crimes, such as larceny, while the closure of cannabis facilities resulted in short-term increases in criminal activity.

Statewide data from California compiled by the RAND institute in 2018 also failed "to find an increase in the type of crime predicted by law enforcement. We find no effects on burglary, robberies, or assaults, which are the types of crimes one would expect if dispensaries were prime targets as a result of their holding large amounts of cash."

The bottom line? One in five Americans reside in a jurisdiction where the adult use of cannabis is legal under state statute, and the majority of citizens reside someplace where the medical use of cannabis is legally authorized. Many of these latter programs have been in place for the better part of two decades. Were the societal impacts of these policies as dire to public health and safety as those like Jason Johnson allege, public and political support in American for marijuana policy reform would be rapidly declining. Instead, just the opposite is true.

According to the latest national polling compiled by Gallup, 66 percent of U.S. adults — including majorities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans — believe that the adult use of marijuana should be legal. It's time for politicians to act on this public sentiment and reject the fear-mongering of those who insist on the perpetuation of criminalization.