



Sessions: Legal pot drives violent crime, statistics be damned

The Attorney General revives debunked pot-crime link.

Alan Pyke

February 28, 2017

While the Trump administration has yet to take any formal action on marijuana policy, its words continue to signal a crackdown.

On Monday, days after White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer told reporters to expect stricter enforcement of federal pot law, Attorney General Jeff Sessions recycled discredited drug war talking points in remarks of his own.

“I believe it’s an unhealthy practice, and current levels of THC in marijuana are very high compared to what they were a few years ago, and we’re seeing real violence around that,” Sessions said. “Experts are telling me there’s more violence around marijuana than one would think and there’s big money involved.”

In reality, violent crime rates tend to decrease where marijuana is legalized.

Denver saw a 2.2 percent drop in violent crime rates in the year after the first legal recreational cannabis sales in Colorado. Overall property crime dropped by 8.9 percent in the same period there, according to figures from the Drug Policy Alliance. In Washington, violent crime rates dropped by 10 percent from 2011 to 2014. Voters legalized recreational marijuana there in 2012.

Medical marijuana laws, which have a longer track record for academics than recreational pot legalization, are also associated with stable or falling violent crime rates. In one 2014 study of the 11 states that legalized medical pot from 1990 to 2006, there was no increase in the seven major categories of violent crime and “some evidence of decreasing rates of some types of violent crime, namely homicide and assault.”

Sessions isn’t operating entirely by his lonesome in claiming pot liberalization begets violence. A handful of Colorado politicians insist that crime there is going up in acute response to legalization—a claim that others including the Denver police department reject.

But the reality is that legalization probably has no significant effect on crime rates. Crime statistics are notoriously volatile, making long-term trend analysis far more credible than short-

term comparisons. The Cato Institute's research on legalization suggests the laws do not prompt any real deviation from the long-term trend of dropping violent crime rates.

Sessions earned a reputation as a drug warrior during his decades in the Senate. While President Donald Trump signaled during election season that he would not target state pot legalization, his selection of Sessions to head federal law enforcement efforts has had the nascent pot industry on edge for weeks.

Spicer's comments last week raised eyebrows among business owners, National Cannabis Industry Association spokeswoman Taylor West told ThinkProgress. "I wouldn't say you're seeing panic out of people in the industry," she said. "But there is definitely a renewed understanding that we have to work very hard to make sure that this administration understands the implications of trying to shut down voter-approved regulated programs."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Sessions unwittingly made the case *against* treating pot activity like serious crime. "You can't sue somebody for drug debt," he said. "The only way to get your money is through strong-arm tactics, and violence tends to follow that."

Legalizing, regulating, and taxing the sale of marijuana is the surest way to remedying that exact tendency for pot commerce to trigger violent score-settling. Legalization invites pot business into the light, granting cannabusinesses at least partial access to official modes of recourse when they are defrauded.

Marijuana Majority chairman Tom Angell latched onto Sessions' hamfisted invocation of back-alley score settling between pot traders. The Attorney General "inadvertently articulat[ed] the strongest argument that exists for legalization," Angell said in a statement. "The only connection between marijuana and violence is the one that exists when illegal sellers battle it out for profits in the black market."

Even absent a potential Trump/Sessions crackdown, the federal government impedes the full social and economic benefits of legitimizing marijuana trade by keeping businesses from accessing basic banking services. Businesses are forced to deal entirely in cash, making industry employees and businesses into targets for robbers.

While the current contradictions in state and federal pot law do generate new criminal opportunities and incentives around such cash stockpiles, the primary effect of legalization is to eliminate vast categories of crime.