

## California's Biggest (and Most Surprising) Marijuana Opponent

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After California residents voted overwhelmingly to legalize recreational marijuana in 2016, Gov. Jerry Brown moved swiftly to implement regulations for the new market. Marijuana legalization, which took effect Jan. 1, has been applauded by many lawmakers in the state, either for the tax revenue its projected to bring in or for the effect it will have on the criminal justice system.

But not everyone is cheering.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas has been a staunch opponent of recreational marijuana all along and has become a poster child for local opposition to legal cannabis in California and in other states across the country.

He may not have much in common with the typical anti-marijuana voter, though.

He's a Democrat and an African-American. In fact, he was the first black man elected to the L.A. County Board. He represents a swath of South Los Angeles that includes Compton, Inglewood and Watts. Polls show that Democrats and minorities are more likely to support legalization than Republicans and white Americans.

It's precisely because of the damage he has seen drugs do in the low-income minority communities he represents that he's been so outspoken against legalization, he has said. (He declined to be interviewed for this story.)

He has written numerous op-eds, likening the spread of pot shops to the blight associated with liquor stores. He has also warned of the health effects of the drug, saying that current strains of marijuana on the street are "not your grandmother's Mary Jane." And he has raised questions about whether cannabis businesses, which are still illegal under federal law and have limited access to banking, will be a prime target of criminal street gangs.

He's even raised issues of economic equity.

"Though dispensaries tend to be concentrated in low-income neighborhoods of color, less than 1 percent are owned by people of color, according to the L.A. County Department of Regional Planning. Apparently, racial and economic discrimination does not stop at the doorstep of the cannabis industry," he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* last summer.

Ridley-Thomas helped pass a ban on the shops throughout Los Angeles County's unincorporated areas, which include 140 communities and 1 million residents. (California's new law lets municipalities decide whether to allow marijuana dispensaries.)

But even as Ridley-Thomas has been pushing back on retail marijuana shops, he's utilizing the new law, known as Proposition 64, to stump for racial equity in drug enforcement. He successfully pushed the Board of Supervisors to pass a motion bolstering the criminal justice reform aspects of Prop. 64, which allows people who have previously been convicted of marijuana possession to be resentenced. His measure is intended to make residents aware of their right to be resentenced under the provisions of the new law.

Marijuana arrests and convictions still disproportionately affect minority residents -- even in places that have made it legal to possess small amounts of the drug.

“Even though marijuana use is fairly consistent across race, Blacks have been four times more likely than Whites to be arrested for marijuana possession. And their punishment persisted long past the time they spent behind bars, because having a conviction on one's record made it difficult, if not impossible, to find a job, obtain housing, secure student loans, earn a professional license, etc,” Ridley-Thomas wrote in a statement in February. “All of those missed opportunities had lasting repercussions, sometimes felt across generations. It also further widened the racial divide, socially and economically.”

Researchers suggest that some of the concerns often raised by opponents of marijuana legalization are misplaced.

For instance, despite Ridley-Thomas' concerns surrounding blight, states which have recently approved recreational marijuana retailers have not seen evidence that the shops are impacting the value of the adjacent real estate, according to a report from the libertarian CATO Institute.

In addition, crime decreased around dispensaries in Seattle, Denver and Portland, Ore., and legalization has never been linked to increased use of the drug. In fact, according to the Drug Policy Alliance, opioid use was lower in states that legalized either recreational or medicinal marijuana use when compared to states that haven't.