



Pat Robertson endorses legal marijuana

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Evangelical leader Pat Robertson shocked the nation recently when he advocated the legalization of marijuana. In an interview with the [N.Y. Times](#), Robertson said, “I really believe we should treat marijuana the way we treat beverage alcohol. I’ve never used marijuana and I don’t intend to, but it’s just one of those things that I think: this war on drugs just hasn’t succeeded.”

Robertson said that his views on legalization formed over time as he came to realize that the U.S. “has gone overboard on this concept of being tough on crime.” He believes that legalization of marijuana would be a way to reduce social and financial costs of the drug war as well as reducing rates of incarceration.

According to the [Justice Policy Institute](#), about one quarter of the two million prisoners in U.S. jails have been convicted of drug offenses. Sixteen percent of state prisoners and 18 percent of federal prisoners had committed crimes to get money for drugs. [Department of Justice](#) statistics show that 12 percent of prisoners at both the state and federal level were convicted of offenses involving marijuana. The number of inmates serving time for marijuana offenses is a relatively small portion of the total U.S. prison population.

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Other arguments for legal marijuana cite statistics that show that states with more drug treatment admissions have lower rates of incarceration. According the [Justice Policy Institute](#), the national average is 433.7 drug treatment admissions and 491 people incarcerated per 100,000 people in the general population. Georgia has fewer drug treatments than average at 369.28 and higher than average incarceration at 533.

Proponents of legalization also cite savings from ending the war on drugs and tax revenue from legal marijuana. It is likely that these benefits would be offset by the increased social costs of legalization as more people would use the drug if it were legal. These would include costs such as healthcare and treatment, lost productivity, auto accidents, crime, and social welfare programs according to a study by [RTI International](#).

European countries have experimented with more liberal drug policies. The Netherlands does not enforce laws against marijuana which resulted in an international tourist trade for Amsterdam's "coffee" shops. The government recently [banned non-Dutch residents](#) from the shops. [In the Netherlands](#), there are strong penalties for possessing, selling, and producing drugs, but not for using. According to an article in [Science](#), increases in use did not accompany decriminalization, but "later growth in commercial access to cannabis, after de facto legalization, was accompanied by steep increases in use, even among youth."

A paper by the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) examined the effects of decriminalization. The paper points out that legalization would decrease the perception of risk and make adolescents more likely to experiment with drugs. The [AAP](#) notes that even though alcohol and tobacco are illegal for minors, both drugs are widely abused by adolescents and companies actively market these products to minors.

The [AAP](#) also cites two studies by the American Medical Association and the Institute of Medicine that point out that there is no rigorous data to support the use of marijuana as a medical drug. While both studies call for more research, they note that, when smoked, marijuana delivers "harmful substances" into the body. Because inhaled marijuana cannot provide the "precisely defined drug affect" of pharmaceutical drugs, "there is very little future in smoked marijuana as a medically approved medication. If there is any future in cannabinoid development, it lies with agents of more certain, not less certain, composition."

Far from being harmless, marijuana carries a host of negative effects for users. Emotional effects cited on [About.com](#) include paranoia, aggression, depression, anxiety, a distorted sense of time, random thinking, and loss of memory. When eaten rather than smoked, marijuana can also cause hallucinations, delusions, and disorientation. Marijuana increases the heart rate and decreases blood pressure leading to an elevated risk of heart attacks. Smoking marijuana causes the same respiratory

problems as smoking tobacco and a link to cancer is suspected. The drug is also believed to suppress the body's immune system, which can lead to other health problems including an increased risk of bacterial infections and tumors.

While marijuana is not as addictive as other drugs, including tobacco and alcohol, the [National Institute of Drug Abuse](#) found that estimated nine percent of users become dependent on marijuana. That number almost doubles for users who start young and is as high as 50 percent for daily users. Marijuana users also have higher rates of use for other drugs and drug problems than nonusers. More than half of the Americans who use illegal drugs use marijuana.

If marijuana were legalized, prices would fall as the supplies of the drug increased and became easier to obtain. Economic laws of supply and demand show that as prices fall, demand rises. Therefore it should be expected that use of marijuana would increase under decriminalization. The number of people addicted to marijuana and introduced to other drugs through marijuana would increase as well. While alcohol and tobacco are more harmful to society than marijuana today, if marijuana were legalized its negative impact on society would increase as well.

Ballot initiatives in several states are attempting to decriminalize marijuana. [California](#) voters rejected a proposition to legalize the drug in 2010, but Gov. Schwarzenegger signed a bill into law that made possession of less than an ounce a civil infraction rather than a misdemeanor. Colorado and Massachusetts are currently the forefront of attempts to decriminalize marijuana.

In Georgia, possession of less than an ounce of marijuana will normally mean probation on the first offense according to [NORML](#). Subsequent offenses can lead to a year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. Possession of more than an ounce can mean 10 years in jail. According to [marijuana.com](#), Georgia allows distribution of medical marijuana that is received from the federal government. There is no notable movement to decriminalize marijuana in Georgia.

Most other Christian leaders are not following Robertson's lead. In a 2010 commentary, [Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship](#) pointed out the flaws in the legalization arguments. Colson said, "There is no legitimate moral or pragmatic reason to legalize a drug that destroys the lives of those addicted to it and that fuels crime and corruption."

Robertson told the [Times](#), “I believe in working with the hearts of people, and not locking them up,” but he has a lot of work to do in convincing other conservatives and Christians. Several prominent conservatives and libertarians have endorsed legal marijuana in addition to Robertson, such as presidential candidate [Ron Paul](#), talk-show host [Glenn Beck](#) and the libertarian [Cato Institute](#). Nevertheless, while 41 percent of Americans favor legal marijuana according to a [Pew poll](#), only 25 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Protestants do.