

The Shotgun Blog

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California considers legalizing marijuana

There's positive news on the war on drugs coming from south of the border, where California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has signalled his willingness to debate the issue of [legalizing marijuana](#):

As California struggles to find cash, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said Tuesday it's time to study whether to legalize and tax marijuana for recreational use....

"Well, I think it's not time for (legalization), but I think it's time for a debate," Schwarzenegger said. "I think all of those ideas of creating extra revenues, I'm always for an open debate on it. And I think we ought to study very carefully what other countries are doing that have legalized marijuana and other drugs, what effect did it have on those countries?"



Fortunately, there's a growing body of evidence that experiments in decriminalization and legalization have produced positive results. The Cato institute recently took a look at Portugal's experience with decriminalization and found it to be [quite good](#):

The paper, published by Cato in April, found that in the five years after personal possession was decriminalized, illegal drug use among teens in Portugal declined and rates of new HIV infections caused by sharing of dirty needles dropped, while the number of people seeking treatment for drug addiction more than doubled.

"Judging by every metric, decriminalization in Portugal has been a resounding success," says Glenn Greenwald, an attorney, author and fluent Portuguese speaker, who conducted the research. "It has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country does."

Another study published in the British Journal of Psychiatry offers an evaluation of various marijuana policy regimes and makes the [case for decriminalization](#):

The Dutch experience, together with those of a few other countries with more modest policy changes, provides a moderately good empirical case that removal of criminal prohibitions on cannabis possession (decriminalization) will not increase the prevalence of marijuana or any other illicit drug; the argument for decriminalization is thus strong....

Our judgement, based on review of the research literature, is that at present the primary harms of marijuana use (including those borne by non-users) come from criminalization: expensive and intrusive enforcement, inequality, shock to the conscience from disproportionate sentence and a substantial (though generally non-violent) black market.

Likewise, a study published in the American Journal of Public Health compared marijuana use in Amsterdam and San Francisco and found very little difference in the rate of cannabis use, despite big differences in how the two cities [regulate the drug](#):

If drug policies are a potent influence on user behavior, there should not be such strong similarities across such different drug control regimes. Our findings do not support claims that criminalization reduces cannabis use and that decriminalization increases cannabis use. Moreover, Dutch decriminalization does not appear to be associated with greater use of other illicit drugs relative to drug use in San Francisco, nor does criminalization in San Francisco appear to be associated with less use of other illicit drugs relative to their use in Amsterdam. Indeed, to judge from the lifetime prevalence of other illicit drug use, the reverse may be the case.

If only we could get our politicians talking seriously about legalizing marijuana. Besides issues of freedom and liberty, there are many economic reasons why Canada should get serious about reforming our outdated drug laws. If Canada were to adopt the illicit drug policies of the Netherlands, the costs associated with prohibition would be marginalized in the areas of policing, judicial processes, and health services. If the sale of marijuana were to be legalized in Canada, the respective costs associated with policing would decrease due to the fact that Canadian society would not ensue the corresponding costs of arresting people for the consumption and distribution of the drug. Likewise, the judicial system would not incur the costs of prosecuting and incarcerating individuals for marijuana related transgressions. Furthermore, the corresponding tax revenue that would be accumulated through the legalized sale of marijuana could be used to enhance education and rehabilitation programs that would effectively marginalize the negative externalities associated with illicit drug use.

Update: It's been brought to my attention that a new poll shows that 52% of Americans support legalizing marijuana. While this is promising, there has also been some criticism of how the poll was conducted. More from [Reason Magazine](#).

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