



Marijuana Arrests Dropped Sharply In 2020 As Both COVID And Legalization Spread, FBI Data Shows

Kyle Jaeger

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Marijuana arrests declined significantly in 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic, newly released FBI data shows.

There were 1,155,610 drug-related arrests overall last year, with cannabis sales and possession busts accounting for just over 30 percent (or 350,150) of those cases. The vast majority were for marijuana possession alone.

The agency's data shows that there was a cannabis arrest every 90 seconds in the country in 2020, and there was a drug-related arrest every 27 seconds.

While these figures still highlight the rampant, ongoing criminalization of cannabis in states across the U.S., it's a substantial deescalation compared to 2019, when FBI reported a total of 545,601 marijuana arrests. That amounted to a cannabis bust every 58 seconds.

Put another way, there was a 36 percent decrease in cannabis cases from 2019 to 2020. And while the federal agency doesn't attempt to explain the statistical shift, there are a number of factors that could help explain it.

One of the more obvious societal changes during that timeframe is the COVID-19 health crisis, which involved social distancing requirements and generally discouraged people from being out in public where they might be at higher risk of being arrested for simple possession.

But advocates have also pointed out that the marijuana reform movement could be playing a role. Illinois's adult-use cannabis law took effect at the beginning of 2020, for example. Hawaii, New Mexico and North Dakota also enacted decriminalization of marijuana possession in 2019, and Virginia followed suit the next year.

In Arizona, limited cannabis possession was legalized for adults starting on November 30, 2020 following voter approval of a reform initiative earlier that month.

“As more states move toward the sensible policy of legalizing and regulating cannabis, we are seeing a decline in the arrest of non-violent marijuana consumers nationwide,” NORML Executive Director Erik Altieri told Marijuana Moment. “The fight for legalization is a fight for justice. While these numbers represent a historic decline in arrests, even one person being put into handcuffs for the simple possession of marijuana is too many.”

Despite the decline in cannabis busts, the new data shows that American law enforcement still carried out more arrests for marijuana alone last year than for murder, rape, robbery, burglary, fraud and embezzlement combined.

It should be noted that not all local police participate in FBI’s reporting program, so these figures are not holistic and are estimates the agency makes based on those that do submit data.

The country had seen a consistent decline in cannabis arrests for roughly a decade prior to 2016, when those cases started to rise up until 2019.

Observers expect to see the downward trend in cannabis busts continue as more states move to end prohibition and law enforcement deprioritizes marijuana-related cases. In New York, for example, police received new guidance this year stipulating that adults 21 and older can possess certain amounts of marijuana and consume it in places where tobacco use is permitted.

That directive alone seems to have led to a dramatic decrease in cannabis arrests in New York City.

Federal marijuana trafficking cases also continued to decline in 2020 as more states have moved to legalize, an analysis from the U.S. Sentencing Commission (USSC) that was released in June found.

Federal prosecutions of drug-related crimes overall increased in 2019, but cases involving marijuana dropped by more than a quarter, according to an end-of-year report released by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts in December.

A study released by the Cato Institute in 2018 found that “state-level marijuana legalization has significantly undercut marijuana smuggling.”