

Five Reasons Cops Want to Legalize Marijuana

More and more police officers are realizing the War on Drugs is a mistake

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Global Research, August 17, 2013

[Rolling Stone](#) 27 June 2013

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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Most people don't think "cops" when they think about who supports marijuana legalization. Police are, after all, the ones cuffing stoners, and law enforcement groups have a long history of lobbying against marijuana policy reform. Many see this as a major factor in preventing the federal government from recognizing that a historic majority of Americans – [52 percent](#) – favors legalizing weed.

[Top 10 Marijuana Myths and Facts](#)

But the landscape is changing fast. Today, a growing number of cops are part of America's "[marijuana majority](#)." Members of the non-profit group Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) say that loosening our pot policy wouldn't necessarily condone drug use, but control it, while helping cops to achieve their ultimate goal of increasing public safety. Here are the five biggest reasons why even cops are starting to say, "Legalize It!"

1. It's about public safety.

While marijuana is a relatively harmless drug, the black market associated with it can cause significant harm. Much like the prohibition of alcohol, marijuana's illegality does not erase the profit incentive – instead, it establishes a risky, unregulated market in which violence and intimidation are used to settle disputes.

"When we ended the prohibition of alcohol, Al Capone was out of work the next day," says Stephen Downing, Los Angeles' former Deputy Chief of Police. "Our drug policy is really anti-public safety and pro-cartel, pro-street gang, because it keeps them in business."

Marijuana trafficking represents a significant chunk of business for black-market cartels. Though the exact percentage of cartel profits from pot is disputed, lowball estimates fall at around [20 percent](#).

"During my time on the border, I saw literally tons of marijuana come over the border from Mexico," says Jamie Haase, a former special agent in the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement division. "Competition over the profits to be made from this illicit industry has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of individuals in that country, and an ever-increasing amount of violence spilling over into the United States, where the Justice Department estimates Mexican cartels now operate in more than 1,000 American cities."

2. Cops want to focus on crimes that hurt real victims.

In the past decade, police made more than 7 million marijuana arrests, 88 percent of them for [possession alone](#). In 2010, states spent \$3.6 billion enforcing the war on pot, with blacks nearly four times as likely as whites to be arrested. That's a lot of police time and resources wasted, says former Seattle Chief of Police Norm Stamper, who had an "aha moment" about marijuana policy while working for the San Diego Police Department in the late 1960s.

"I had arrested a 19-year-old in his parents' home for the possession of a very small quantity of marijuana, and put him in the backseat of a caged police car, after having kicked down his door," recalls Stamper. While driving the prisoner to jail, he says, "I realized, mainly, that I could have been doing real police work, but instead I'm going to be out of service for several hours impounding the weed, impounding him, and writing arrest, impound, and narcotics reports. I was away from the people I had been hired to serve and in no position to stop a reckless drunk driver swerving all over the road, or to respond to a burglary in progress, or intervene in domestic violence situation."

Cops have limited resources, and spending them on marijuana arrests will inevitably divert them from other policing. Adds Stamper, "In short, making a marijuana arrest for a simple possession case was no longer, for me, real police work."

3. Cops want strong relationships with the communities they serve.

Baltimore narcotics veteran Neil Franklin says the prevalence of marijuana arrests, especially among communities of color, creates a "hostile environment" between police and the communities they serve. "Marijuana is the number one reason right now that police use to search people in this country," he says. "The odor of marijuana alone gives a police officers probable cause to search you, your person, your car, or your home."

Legalizing pot, says Franklin, could lead to "hundreds of thousands of fewer negative police and citizen contacts across this country. That's a hell of an opportunity for law enforcement to rebuild some bridges in our communities - mainly our poor, black and Latino communities."

Franklin adds that this would increase citizens' trust in police, making them more likely to communicate and help solve more serious crimes. Building mutual respect would also protect cops on the job. Adds Franklin, "Too many police officers are killed or injured serving the War on Drugs as opposed to protecting and serving their communities."

4. The war on pot encourages bad - and even illegal - police practices.

Downing says that monetary incentives for drug arrests, like asset forfeiture and federal grants, encourage an attitude where police will make drug arrests by any means necessary, from militarized SWAT raids to [paid informants who admit to lying](#). "The overall effect is that we are losing ground in terms of the traditional peace officer role of protecting public safety, and morphing our local police officers into federal drug warriors," Downing says.

Quotas and pressure for officers to make drug arrests - which profit police departments via federal funding and asset forfeiture - also encourage routine violations of the Fourth Amendment ban on unreasonable searches and seizures. The NYPD, for example, stops and sometimes frisks well over 500,000 people a year, the vast majority of them youths of color - the basis for a pending federal lawsuit challenging the policy on constitutional grounds. While New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has defended stop-and-frisk as a way to get guns

off the street, in fact, it's more often used to arrest kids with small amounts of weed. Stamper adds that legalization would allow police officers "to see young adults not as criminals, but members of their community" - and start respecting those young people's civil liberties.

5. Cops want to stop kids from abusing drugs.

Marijuana's illegality has done very little to stop its use. A recent survey by the [National Institutes of Health](#) found that 36 percent of high school seniors had smoked marijuana in the past year. Legalization would most likely involve age restrictions on marijuana purchases, while at the same time providing quality control over product. "The only way we can effectively control drugs is to create a regulatory system for all of them," says Stamper.

"If you are truly a proponent of public safety, if you truly want safer communities, then it's a no-brainer that we have to end drug prohibition and treat [marijuana] as a health issue, like we did with tobacco," says Franklin. "Education and treatment is the most effective and cost-efficient way to reduce drug use."

On the other hand, adds Franklin, "If you support a current system of drug prohibition, then you support the very same thing that the cartel and neighborhood gangs support. You might as well be standing next to them, shaking hands. Because they don't want an end to prohibition, either."

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