

Should All Drugs be Legalized? Why That Idea Could Do More Harm Than Good

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Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of senseless deaths occur each year due to accidental ingestion of Fentanyl by people using recreational drugs. In 2022, the US recorded over a hundred thousand drug overdose deaths, with synthetic opioids like fentanyl being a major contributor. (Drug Overdose Death in the United States, 2002-2022 - CDC). In fact, 70% of illicit pills contain fentanyl (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration - [16]). As illicit drug use has become more affordable and accessible in the United States, our fentanyl problem has become more prevalent. This has sparked an intense debate on how best to solve this growing issue, with a leading proposal being government regulation and legalization as a safer alternative to current prohibition strategies.

Some scholars and government officials believe that if the government and the FDA controlled the packaging, distribution, and creation of drugs, the streets of America would become a safer place for people and reduce the senseless deaths caused by accidental ingestion of Fentanyl when people consume other illicit drugs.

Historically, countries that have pursued drug legalization have tended to do so gradually, starting with marijuana. Yet while some nations have cautiously explored legalization, others have doubled down on harsh prohibition by criminalizing drug sales with long prison sentences—a strategy that has often produced devastating social consequences. The War on Drugs, initiated in the U.S. in the 1970s, aimed to reduce drug use through strict law enforcement and harsh penalties. However, critics argue that this approach has led to mass incarceration, especially among members of marginalized communities, without significantly reducing drug abuse or improving public health. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Black Americans are nearly four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white Americans, despite similar usage rates (Edwards et al. 5) [8].

In contrast, countries like Portugal have taken a different approach. According to a case study on drug decriminalization in Portugal in 2001, Portugal decriminalized all drugs for personal use. Instead of jail time, individuals caught with small amounts of drugs are offered treatment and counseling. This model is often cited as a public health success, as drug-related deaths and infections like HIV have decreased since the policy change (Slade 7)[15]. Proponents of full legalization argue that treating drug use as a public health issue rather than a criminal one would reduce the shame attached to addiction, increase access to treatment, and weaken the power of drug cartels. They also argue that regulation could make drug use safer by ensuring purity and reducing overdose deaths. On the other hand, opponents worry that legalizing all drugs might increase addiction rates, normalize dangerous behavior, and overwhelm healthcare systems. They also argue that the social costs—like impaired driving, work productivity losses, or youth exposure—might outweigh the benefits. The legalization of drugs could cause more problems: increase addiction, reduce societal productivity, and expose vulnerable populations (especially youth) to greater harm under the illusion of safety and legitimacy.

Drugs in Schools

Walk into any high school today, and you'll probably see—or at least hear about—students vaping in the bathrooms, talking openly about weed, or even using pills. Drug usage is already becoming normalized, even while many of these drugs are still illegal. Now, imagine what would happen if all of them were legalized. Would students feel like drugs are even more acceptable? Safer? That's a dangerous mindset, especially for teenagers who are very impressionable during their formative years. In the age of social media, teenagers can access a wide range of knowledge from influencers around the globe. Legalizing drugs has the potential for these teenagers to copy the behavior they see online from their favorite content creators.

According to a 2011 report from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, medical marijuana advertising targeting youth has increased, making teenagers vulnerable to developing addiction (Office of National Drug Control Policy 25)[17]. This is a big problem because teen brains are still developing, and substances like cannabis can interfere with memory, motivation, and mental health. The same report warns that teenagers' attitudes towards drugs and marijuana are becoming more positive, which suggests that an increase in use may occur in the future (Office of National Drug Control Policy 2)[17]. A teen's developmental age is crucial because their brains are highly plastic and can be shaped either positively or negatively. Increased drug use (marijuana in particular) can destroy the development of the hippocampus, a key structure for memory and learning. This could cause a massive decrease in student education and capacity to learn, harming school performance.

Additional studies support this. In an article published in Missouri Medicine, Schnabel and Bresnahan (Wilkinson et al. 4) [18] explain that marijuana use increases in places where it's legalized. In schools, this means more students are exposed to drugs and might feel like it's normal for them to use them because it is legal. The change from illegal to legal becomes a green light for children to think drug use is acceptable.

In addition, a report from The Impact cited the National Library of Medicine and stated that "since recreational marijuana was legalized, traffic deaths where drivers tested positive for marijuana increased 138% while all Colorado traffic deaths increased 29% (Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Program 6)[13]." This just goes to show the negative effect of the legalization of just one singular drug.

There are many parallels between the legalization of drugs and the legality of alcohol. Teens see adults drinking openly without fear of negative effects, which implicitly gives the impression of safety or a kind of "permission." As such, it makes sense that teen alcohol use is much higher than teen illicit drug use. But it's reasonable to assume that, as drugs are legalized and regulated like alcohol, teens may start abusing drugs to the same degree that they currently abuse alcohol. The history of vaping is instructive in a similar way. Initially, vaping was introduced as a "healthier" alternative to smoking, and it was heavily marketed to consumers in this way. As a result, the introduction of vaping led to increases in teen nicotine use. In short, many more teens use alcohol and vaping products than illicit drugs. This suggests that the legalization of currently banned drugs would lead to increased usage among teens.

Making all drugs legal doesn't just make them easier to access—it can make them seem safer than they are. And that's a risk we can't afford to take with the next generation.

Unintended Consequences

Legalization supporters have a financial motive in that taxing legal drugs could generate revenue, reduce prison costs, and create jobs. Some of that is true, especially when it comes to cannabis. But those benefits come with a price.

A 2019 working paper from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City describes how legalizing cannabis brings in money through taxes and job growth, but it also brings new public health risks, such as more people needing medical care for drug-related issues (Brown, Cohen, & Felix 2)[2]. Emergency room visits, addiction treatment programs, and mental health support aren't cheap and are the costs of overuse and addiction. In some cases, the costs of treating people who struggle with addiction could outweigh the benefits of new tax revenue.

The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2023) makes a similar point. Their report says that while legalization can help regulate drug safety, it also leads to more use—and subsequently more cases of drug dependence, impaired driving, and cognitive problems over time (Rogers 1)[14]. Legalization doesn't stop people from getting hurt by drugs; it just shifts the kind of damage that happens.

In addition, when everything becomes legalized—not just marijuana—the risks multiply quickly. Opioids, for example, have already devastated entire communities across the country. Making them easier to obtain legally may reduce street overdoses. However, it would increase addiction rates—especially since in most cases, opioid use starts as a treatment path at medical facilities. The Newport Institute adds that legalization could lead to more “co-occurring disorders”—people who struggle with anxiety or depression could see their symptoms increase when drug use increases (Newport Institute 1)[9]. For teens, drugs often don't start out as the problem—they start out as a way to cope. But they usually make things worse.

Does Legalization Really Reduce Crime?

Another argument that proponents of legalization make is that it would reduce crime (e.g., Office of Justice Programs, 1994). Fewer people would be arrested for possession, drug dealers would lose power, and the justice system would save money. Legalizing drugs might reduce some crimes, like arrests for simple possession. But it doesn't mean that crime would disappear. In fact, some types of crime could go up; more drug use can lead to more domestic violence, theft, accidents, and public disturbances. It's not always about the drug itself—it's about what happens when people use it recklessly or lose control. Today, we can look at real-world examples. Countries like Portugal, which decriminalized all drugs in 2001, saw some positive changes, but they also heavily invested in treatment and education. Making drugs legal without those supports won't magically fix things. In Colombia, researchers Ramirez-Hassan, Gomez, Velasquez, and Tangarife (2023) studied what happened after cannabis was legalized. They found that while tax revenue went up and the black market shrank, there were still big concerns about how legalization affected young people (Ramirez-Hassan et al. 30)[12]. Even a carefully



controlled system couldn't stop problems from happening—and again, that was just cannabis. What happens when you add heroin and meth to the mix?

Conclusion

Legalizing all drugs might sound like a bold, even courageous idea. But in reality, it could do more harm than good. From rising youth addiction and overwhelmed healthcare systems to aggressive marketing and new forms of inequality, the risks are just too high. Yes, the United States' current system needs fixing—but legalization isn't the answer. The United States needs a smarter policy, better treatment options, and a focus on health and justice—not a green light for every dangerous drug out there.

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