

The recent trend to legalize marijuana (a.k.a. “pot,” “weed,” and maybe other names with which I, as a non-user, am unfamiliar) has aroused much furor. Even some in law enforcement and medicine now question the wisdom of continuing policies that seem only to have exacerbated a problem arising mainly from propaganda-induced hysteria (e.g., “Reefer Madness” and its progeny). So, let’s sort out the main issues.

Addiction: Marijuana is described as an addictive drug, despite that most users exhibit no clear signs of dependence. Many puff a joint now and then, but have been known to put it aside for months at a time. Still, some individuals are unusually susceptible to addiction; as with those prone to alcoholism, even minimal exposure triggers dependence.

But we now treat alcoholism as a health issue, not a crime. We don’t punish mere consumption of alcohol, but only dangerous behavior resulting therefrom. Why should we treat marijuana differently? Doing so hasn’t solved problems, but rather has created them, by overflowing prisons and burdening many otherwise harmless and productive people with criminal records. (Users’ money supports crime? Easy fix: Legalize pot!)

Gateway Drug: It’s “a known fact” that marijuana use leads to use of more dangerous drugs—except that this “fact” isn’t borne out in reality. Granted, many hard-drug users first experiment with marijuana; but to conclude that one causes the other is fallacious. Closer scrutiny reveals why: Most marijuana users are content with their substance of choice, and never “graduate” to truly dangerous drugs. The bogus cause-effect claim is thus refuted.

But consider the law itself, based on the claim that marijuana is dangerously addictive, when it’s arguably less so than legal tobacco and alcohol. For nearly a century, children have been warned of marijuana’s supposed horrors; yet, motivated by curiosity, rebelliousness, or peer pressure, many have tried it anyway. Finding first-hand that marijuana isn’t nearly as dangerous

as claimed, kids lose any credence and respect they might have had for authorities making that claim. Concluding that they've probably been lied to about other illicit drugs as well, and thus emboldened to experiment further, they then discover—too late—that the advertised dangers of those other drugs are real. Blame for any “gateway” effect belongs, not to marijuana itself, but to generations of irrational treatment of it by our legal system. Indeed, repealing pointless or counterproductive laws, such as prohibition of substances no more dangerous than those already legal, might, over time, help restore credence and respect for law and order.

Problems with legalization: Would marijuana legalization introduce any bad effects, such as reckless indulgence and crime-ridden neighborhoods? Probably no more than what we have already. Repeal of alcohol prohibition was followed by a transient surge in use, but this subsided as the novelty faded. And obviously, legalizing marijuana would drastically reduce its contribution to criminality.

Safeguards: Legal or not, marijuana is an intoxicant. It shouldn't be used before or while driving, operating machinery, using weapons, or making important decisions. Production and distribution should be regulated, and facilities fenced. Retail outlets should be zoned and restricted as are liquor stores, with sales taxed to recover government expenses. Bootlegging should remain illegal. The main hurdle, I think, will be getting our dysfunctional federal government to legalize nationally, so that banks' facilitation of the business is no longer hobbled by fear of violating federal law and regulation.

“GC_20150619_Marijuana.doc”, created 2015-05-25, last modified 2015-09-19, submitted 2015-06-01 for publication 2015-06-19 (DDN) and 2015-07-03 (JN) as an “Ideas & Voices” guest column.