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## Why use sociological theories to explain deviance, conformity and social control?



**Figure 1.** Washington is one of several states where marijuana use has been legalized, decriminalized, or approved for medical use. (Photo courtesy of Dominic Simpson/flickr)

Thirty states in the United States and the District of Columbia have passed measures legalizing marijuana in some form; the majority of these states approve only medical use of marijuana, ten states and the District of Columbia approve recreational use as well (Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington). Colorado and California were the first states to pass legalization measures in 2012 but other states are working to legalize marijuana for a variety of reasons.

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## Wide partisan gap in opinions about legalizing marijuana use

*% who say use of marijuana should be...*

|                              | Legal<br>% | Illegal<br>% | DK<br>% |
|------------------------------|------------|--------------|---------|
| Total                        | 61         | 37           | 3=100   |
| Men                          | 64         | 33           | 3=100   |
| Women                        | 57         | 41           | 3=100   |
| White                        | 62         | 36           | 2=100   |
| Black                        | 71         | 25           | 4=100   |
| Hispanic                     | 52         | 44           | 4=100   |
| College grad+                | 65         | 32           | 3=100   |
| Some college                 | 65         | 32           | 3=100   |
| HS or less                   | 54         | 43           | 2=100   |
| Republican                   | 43         | 55           | 2=100   |
| Democrat                     | 69         | 28           | 3=100   |
| Independent                  | 65         | 32           | 3=100   |
| White evangelical Protestant | 38         | 60           | 2=100   |
| White mainline Protestant    | 64         | 33           | 2=100   |
| Catholic                     | 52         | 45           | 4=100   |
| Unaffiliated                 | 78         | 20           | 2=100   |

Note: Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 25-30, 2017.

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**Figure 2.** Opinions about marijuana legalization differ among societal groups. [“About six-in-ten Americans support marijuana legalization.”](#) Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (October 8, 2018, 2018). The Pew Research Center also found [“Wide Partisan Gap in Opinions About Legalizing Marijuana Use.”](#) Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (January 5, 2018).

The Pew Research Center found that a majority of people in the United States (61 percent) now favor legalizing marijuana.<sup>[1]</sup> This 2017 finding was a follow-up survey to a 2013 Pew survey in which 52 percent of Americans favored legalization (and the first time that a majority of survey respondents supported making marijuana legal), which shows a substantial increase in just four years and reflects the national pattern of state legalization. A question about marijuana’s legal status was first asked in a 1969 Gallup poll, and only 12 percent of U.S. adults favored

legalization at that time.

Decriminalization has even wider support. Pew also found that 76 percent of those surveyed currently do not favor jail time for individuals convicted of minor possession of marijuana (Motel 2014).

Even though many people favor legalization, 39 percent remain opposed (Geiger 2018) and the legalization of marijuana in any form remains controversial. Citizen's Against Legalizing Marijuana (CALM) is one of the largest political action committees (PACs) working to prevent or repeal legalization measures. There are distinctive patterns among groups in society and how they feel about marijuana legalization. As you can see in Figure 2, the groups within society least likely to support marijuana legalization are Republicans (55 percent oppose) and white evangelical Protestants (60 percent oppose). Age is also a factor, with 67 percent of Republicans ages 65 and over opposing legalization.

Tattoos, vegan lifestyles, single parenthood, breast implants, and even jogging were once considered deviant but are now widely accepted. As in many aspects of sociology, there are no absolute answers about deviance. What people agree is deviant differs in various societies and subcultures, and it may change over time.

The change process usually takes some time and may be accompanied by significant disagreement, especially for social norms that are viewed as essential. For example, divorce affects the social institution of family, and so divorce carried a deviant and stigmatized status at one time. Marijuana use was once seen as deviant and criminal, but U.S. social norms on this issue are changing.

In this module, you'll learn more about what is considered deviant behavior and then examine how societies work to control and prevent deviance through methods of social control. You'll also examine the U.S. criminal justice system and examine statistics related to crime in America. Why is the incarceration rate in the United States abnormally high, even though incidents of crime in the United States are not dramatically higher than they are elsewhere? Do you think the criminal justice system in the United States is effective? How might you explain the recidivism rate for those jailed in the United States (two-thirds of prison inmates will be convicted on another charge within three years of having been released and return to prison)? Keep these questions in mind as you read through the material in this module.

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1. Geiger, A. 2018. "About six-in-ten-Americans support marijuana legalization."  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/08/americans-support-marijuana-legalization/>

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