

Editorial: Did legalizing weed sanction raising demand? Either way, that's the Midwest reality.

By [The Editorial Board](#)

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As marijuana becomes legal in Illinois, dozens of people brave the cold before sunrise as they wait for the Mission Dispensary in Chicago to open on Jan. 1, 2020. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

Take a drive along Interstate 94, beginning in Port Huron, Michigan, and headed toward Detroit and points west. As you travel, you'll find billboards advertising recreational cannabis by the side of the road. Billboard after billboard after billboard.

In fact, there are lengthy sections of that freeway where it seems like cannabis sellers are the only businesses advertising at all. Had you been away since Michigan legalized weed in 2018, you might think you'd returned not home to "Pure Michigan" but to some unfamiliar psychedelic land.

That level of advertising, fully visible to the kids in the back seat, cannot help but boost demand.

Worries over excessive use is why states historically have restricted cigarette and alcohol advertising, even while indulging in those things has remained perfectly legal. Reasonable people have understood the right of adults to imbibe or smoke in moderation while simultaneously recognizing the societal dangers of overindulgence. An entire public health system has devoted extraordinary amounts of attention to finding that balance, to keeping people as safe as possible and keeping adult substances away from kids.

But when Michigan and Illinois decided to legalize recreational cannabis use, the debate mostly centered not on what might happen to demand but on the benefits of decriminalization and new tax revenues.

And as retail licenses proliferated in those and other states, most of the journalistic ink and political blather was expended on the issue of whether the right people were getting a big enough piece of the lucrative retailing pie. Far more stories were written about the equity (or lack thereof) of the licensing processes than what this new retail industry could potentially do to the consuming citizenry of the affected states.

From the governor's offices on down, the rhetoric was that people are buying, selling and using anyway. Better for them to do so legally, keeping them away from the criminal justice system

and, at the same time, bringing in cash to state coffers; in 2019, Illinois revenues from the new industry were projected to be \$500 million per year or more.

“As the first state in the nation to fully legalize adult-use cannabis through the legislative process, Illinois exemplifies the best of democracy: a bipartisan and deep commitment to better the lives of all of our people,” was the statement Gov. J.B. Pritzker made during a signing ceremony in 2019. “Legalizing adult-use cannabis brings an important and overdue change to our state, and it’s the right thing to do.”

Underneath that rhetoric was the assumption that the demand was already out there and that here was a way to manage it more efficiently and keep people out of the criminal justice pipeline: in Pritzker’s words, to “better the lives of all of our people.” He did not often address the possibility of newly legal marketing and promotion bringing about a huge spike in demand. In fairness to Pritzker, very few governors in legalizing states did.

But there’s now substantial evidence that demand has indeed increased. Massively.

[A new study supported by the National Institutes for Health](#) has found that marijuana and hallucinogen use among young adults reached an all-time high last year. According to the study, the proportion of young adults who reported using marijuana reached 43% in 2021, a big increase from 34% in 2016 and just 29% in 2011. Among college students, it was even higher.

Almost 30% of young adults said they had used weed in the last month, as compared with just 21% in 2016 and 17% in 2011. Perhaps most striking of all, 11% of young adults reported using marijuana every day, compared with 8% in 2016 and 6% in 2011.

It’s also worth noting that the study was based on 2021; those billboards on the interstates have proliferated far more in 2022 as new dispensaries have opened in cities big and small, so it’s logical to assume that usage also has further increased this year.

Is all this increased weed use by young people harmful?

That’s a contested notion, of course, with some arguing that even heavy weed use is benign (or even a positive, given tax revenues and decreased criminal justice expenditures) and others claiming that excessive use can increase the risks of depression, anxiety or even psychosis and reduce educational achievements among teens and college students. That likely explains why the administration of President Joe Biden has viewed the matter as politically toxic and thus as one best left for the states to decide. But governmental public health agencies consistently have pointed to the dangers of addiction, at least for a very small percentage of users, and the potential long-term health impacts of excessive use.

But one thing Illinois and other states where weed is legal now cannot deny is that usage is rising very fast, especially among the young. And that the legalization process, wherein outlets have proliferated and can now be found in numerous convenient locations, has stimulated that demand.

Spalike dispensaries are everywhere, and their promotional campaigns are sophisticated and appealing.

There are two separate issues here that should be openly discussed.

There is the matter of decriminalization, for which there is an excellent case.

And then there is the distinct matter of whether this new industry should be allowed to be so successful as to dominate the vistas of the interstates and spark the kind of increase in demand for its products the NIH-supported study revealed.

If alcohol use were rising at this level, there would be legitimate public health concerns. Cannabis should not be exempt from the same conversations.

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