

{First & Last Name}

Class

Date

Professor Name

[Title]

To legalize or not to legalize? The debate over the legalization of Marijuana has remained at the forefront of government institutions' agendas for decades. Several states have decided to edge closer towards legalization and for states that have yet to pass laws legalizing marijuana, there is a high likelihood that new rules will be adopted. So far, 23 states and the District of Columbia have legalized and or decriminalized marijuana. Thirteen of the twenty-three states, including Washington D.C, and Colorado, have made marijuana legal for recreational use; which is a monumental goal for groups advocating for the acceptance of legal Marijuana (World). Colorado passed the *Colorado Amendment 64* in 2014 and since has essentially become a pilot test for recreational use. Since the passing of the new laws, statistics are being recorded and needless to say, there are substantial benefits from legalization. Of the numerous benefits, the most notable is an economic gain. Colorado grossed a whopping \$98 million in tax revenue after passing Amendment 64 (World). Aside from financial gain, social benefits occurred as well. Statistics suggest a direct correlation between legalization and reductions in violent crimes and a decline in deaths from substance abuse. At a glance, it is evident that states that adopt regulations in favor of marijuana are reaping serious benefits. This argumentative essay will dive deeper into this multifaceted subject and present reasoning as to how legalization can pay dividends for our nation.

Although studies show the positive effects of legalizing cannabis, certain individuals still remain opposed to public adoption. Opposers of Marijuana claim that medical and recreational marijuana legalization will lead to an increase in traffic-related deaths; several studies refute this belief. According to a survey conducted by Columbia University's School of Public Health, traffic-related deaths dropped 11% on average in states that legalized medical marijuana (Cohen). This study analyzed 1.2 million traffic fatalities worldwide to produce these insights. What is fascinating are the findings in California and New Mexico. Following the legalization of marijuana, there was a striking 16% decrease in traffic fatalities in California and a 17% decrease in New Mexico. Author of the study, Benjamin Hansen, remarked on the results saying "Public safety does not decrease with increased access to marijuana. It improves." No direct correlation exists between deaths and marijuana legalization; however, the researchers recognized a clear association between the two elements (Mauro). In most cases, users of marijuana tend to be more aware of their impairment versus those who consume alcohol. The recognition of this impairment helps them make smarter decisions—in this instance opting to stay off the roads while high. So contrary to popular belief, legalization of marijuana does not cause an increase in traffic fatalities.

Another enduring myth is that marijuana is a gateway drug—and this is far from the truth. The gateway drug theory states that people who consume cannabis go on to use harder drugs. However, there are external factors that get overlooked which do influence the use of harder drugs. First, the problem lies in the prohibition of cannabis. Prohibition of marijuana forces consumers to purchase from black market dealers who likely sell other Class A/B drugs. Frequent encounters with black market dealers who sell multiple drugs increases the likelihood

of trying these illicit drugs (Moral). And secondly, the socio-environmental factors. Socialization with drug-using peers that present opportunities and have favorable attitudes toward using illegal drugs can tempt users to use heavier drugs. A study in the Journal of School Health declares the gateway theory cannot be associated with Marijuana; instead, the argument is more applicable to alcohol, one of the most damaging and socially accepted drugs in the world.

“People want medical marijuana to get high”; yet another contradictory and ignorant myth. The most exciting development in medical and recreational marijuana involves the production of strains that are incapable of making anyone feel high. Innovation in the cannabis industry has opened up a new world for people who want their medical benefits without the feelings associated with being ‘high’ (University). And, strangely enough, this negative rhetoric is seldom applied to prescription painkillers which are frequently abused and on average kill 10,000 people every year. In 2016 alone, the overdose epidemic skyrocketed due to sales of synthetic opioids. A shocking 43,000 deaths were recorded due to misuse of doctor prescribed medicines (Scholl). Several unmet medical needs exist for many conditions-- from pain to anxiety to bowel disease to seizures. Closing this gap is possible by introducing medical cannabis as a safe alternative. For those who have not received the desired results from standard pharmaceuticals because of intolerable side effects, expensive costs, or lack of insurance, marijuana can serve as a replacement.

Legal Marijuana can make a meaningful impact to a state’s economy. In Pueblo County, Colorado researchers monitored the impact the sale of legal marijuana had on their economy and found that a taxed and well-regulated marijuana system generates more than \$58 million in taxes for the local economy. Despite the gained revenue, there were costs associated with educating

law enforcement and other social services; however, the county still netted \$35 million (World). According to the Colorado Legislative Council, the state of Colorado projects annual tax profits of \$67 million. Hypothetically this translates to a potential \$131.8 billion net gain for the United States by 2025 if our country were to adopt pro-marijuana laws. This additional money can be used to combat homelessness, hunger, federal debt, and fund scholarships for underprivileged minorities. Legalizing weed also adds to the workforce. In Colorado, 2,000 additional cannabis jobs were created, and job growth is expected to continue (World). Critics are opposed to changing the governing status of marijuana because it requires changing the norm. However, more states are becoming tolerant of marijuana, and are realizing the economic benefits it has.

When compared to other legal drugs, alcohol or tobacco, for example, Marijuana is far less harmful. In actuality, cannabis has been shown to have a myriad of health benefits. Numerous studies published in medical journals such as the *American Journal of Clinical Oncology* cite health benefits across all age ranges, genders, and races (“What Are”). Let us use management as an example; traditional painkillers are effective but have a high risk of causing addiction and even fatality when taken in the incorrect dosages. Cannabis offers the same pain relief with less risk of substance abuse and less side effects. And, in cases where traditional medicine is required, marijuana can be safely used with most medicines—often a combination of the two is the most effective method for a successful treatment. Legal drugs, like Tobacco, are more addictive than cocaine, but the federal government has yet to ban them. Considering the benefits that do exist, banning marijuana is comparable to restricting the consumption of bacon, sky diving, or any other reasonably risky pastime.

Legalizing Marijuana does not significantly affect the number of teens using marijuana. When marijuana is prohibited, teenagers are more inclined to try and access it by taking illegal measures. According to the Washington Post, after the legalization in Colorado and Washington “...not only have the national teen marijuana usage rates *declined*, but problems associated with teen marijuana use, like dependency, fell too.” In Washington during the years 2012 and 2013 the percentage of teenagers who reported using Marijuana was 9.8% (Ingraham). In the subsequent year, 2013-2014, the rate slightly increased to 10.1%. This research completely negates critics who say that legalization is linked to an above average number of adolescents using marijuana. In reality legalizing Marijuana creates an exciting dynamic; when marijuana is regulated teenagers feel that it is harder to find (Ingraham). When it becomes harder to find the net effect is that the overall usage decreases. That is not to deny that teenagers will not try marijuana, however the rate of users is not significantly increased by legalization.

In the never-ending disagreement between journalists, doctors, police, parents, and legislators, it is quite easy to feel swamped by too much information. However, a closer look at the underlying facts reveals a national debate over whether a safe and natural substance should or should not be legal. An old joke says that “Weed has been legal for whites since the beginning of time”; this means that when marijuana is prohibited the consequences fall disproportionately on people of color, minorities, and the poor. Keeping in mind the economic and health benefits that marijuana provides, a decision to pass pro-cannabis laws is also a huge step towards helping millions of African-Americans who are unfairly punished by the judicial system for partaking in this healing plant. Legalization is the answer our nation has needed all along. In the words of Bob Marley, a famous marijuana activist, “The herb is the healer of the nation.”

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