

State of New York: Casualties of the Marijuana Arrest Crusade

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September 2017

There is growing consensus that New York's marijuana policies are a profound and costly failure in both human and economic terms. This fact sheet outlines the problems with our current marijuana policies and identifies solutions to fix them.

New York's Marijuana Policies Are Broken

Marijuana arrests are the engine driving the U.S. war on drugs. In 2015, there were 643,122 marijuana arrests in the U.S. – roughly 43 percent of all drug arrests. The vast majority (over 89 percent) of these arrests were for simple possession, not sale or manufacture. There are more arrests for marijuana possession every year than for all violent crimes combined.¹ In a country characterized by such a punitive approach to marijuana policy, the state of New York – where more than 60 people are arrested for marijuana possession every day – has some of the harshest enforcement practices.^{2, 3}

In 2014, law enforcement in NYC shifted its public policy so that people would be ticketed rather than arrested for possession of marijuana found during the course of a search.⁴ This was done in an effort to align department practices with state law (as described below). Three years later, Professor Harry Levine of Queens College, in conjunction with the Drug Policy Alliance, released a blistering report outlining the continued practice of racially biased marijuana arrests in New York City under Mayor Bill de Blasio, who had campaigned on ending such arrests.⁵ People in NYC and across the state are still being arrested for low-level marijuana possession and forced to deal with the subsequent damaging collateral consequences.^{6,7}

Furthermore, New York's decriminalization of personal possession of marijuana still operates within the framework of prohibition, allowing profound harms to be inflicted upon the state and its residents. Below are some of the symptoms of New York's broken marijuana policies.

Skyrocketing Arrests

Over the past twenty years, New York has become the marijuana arrest capital of the world, with nearly

800,000 marijuana possession arrests and summonses in New York – more than any other state.^{8,9} This is possible despite the state's decriminalization of personal marijuana possession because of a subsection of the law that treats general (or private) possession differently from “public view” possession.

New York's *Marihuana Reform Act of 1977* made private marijuana possession a violation rather than a criminal offense, while making possession in “public view” a misdemeanor.¹⁰ This loophole – coupled with over-policing of certain communities – has resulted in mass arrests for marijuana possession.^{11, 12}

Nearly 23,000 people were arrested statewide in 2016, a nearly 2,300 percent increase from 1990.¹³ The lack of statewide reform means that every year, tens of thousands of New Yorkers continue to be swept into the criminal justice system.

Racial Inequality

Racial disparities in marijuana arrests are consistent across boroughs in New York City and persist across the state.^{14,15} Combined, New York's Black and Latino populations account for a little more than a third of the state's total population,¹⁶ and drug consumption and sales occur at similar rates across racial and ethnic groups.^{17,18} Yet, more than 80% of the people arrested annually for marijuana possession in New York state are Black or Latino.¹⁹

A report by the ACLU found that Black people in New York are arrested or detained for marijuana 4.5 times more than whites.²⁰ There is no evidence to suggest that these disparities will cease to exist without reform, as this trend continued throughout 2016.²¹ Additionally, the vast majority of those arrested are young people between 16 and 29 years old,²² and most arrests occur in the state's poorest neighborhoods.²³

Collateral Consequences

A marijuana arrest is no small matter. It involves being handcuffed, placed in a police car, taken to a police station, fingerprinted, photographed, possibly being held in jail for up to 24 hours while awaiting arraignment

before a judge, appearing in court several times over the course of months, and can conclude with the imposition of a permanent criminal record that can easily be found on the internet by employers, landlords, schools, credit agencies, and banks.²⁴

People arrested or ticketed for simple marijuana possession can face a range of collateral consequences with long-term damaging effects. Those lacking the means to pay the fine have a warrant issued for their arrest, and those arrested can be saddled with a criminal conviction that can make it difficult to get and keep a job, maintain a professional license, obtain educational loans, secure housing, keep custody of a child, or even adopt.²⁵ These obstacles can seriously hinder an individual's ability to successfully participate in society.

Employment

Information about arrests and convictions can be easily accessed by employers through third-party background checks and internet searches.²⁶ Additionally, restrictions on financial aid and denial or revocation of occupational licenses make it very difficult for an individual to obtain the education and training necessary for many jobs.

Housing

An individual who carries a marijuana conviction on their record can be barred from public housing for at least 3 years.²⁷ Additionally, families residing in public housing cannot provide shelter for a loved one with a marijuana conviction without risking eviction. Even if a violation of policy regarding marijuana is not used by the public housing authority to start an action against a resident, it could be used to continue one and further increase the likelihood that a family be displaced from their home.

In many cases – especially when public housing is not an option – an individual with a marijuana conviction may seek private housing. Unfortunately, federal, state, and local fair housing laws created with the intention of ensuring equal housing opportunities for everyone do not provide protections for people with criminal records.^{28, 29}

Research on landlord rental decisions in the state of New York reveals that a criminal conviction reduces the probability of prospective tenants even being allowed to view an apartment rental by more than 50 percent.³⁰ Discrimination in private housing may differ in appearance, but it is hardly less pernicious, and it is multifaceted.

Immigration

For noncitizens, a conviction can trigger deportation, sometimes with almost no possibility of discretionary relief.³¹ In fact, simple marijuana possession was the fourth most common cause of deportation nationally for any crime in 2013.³² Abrupt deportations can separate children from their parents and force families into difficult decisions about childcare and custody/living arrangements.

Child Welfare

Despite similar rates of marijuana use across racial groups,³³ parents of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system.³⁴ Extreme racial disparities in marijuana arrests have left a disproportionate number of families of color to deal with the subsequent collateral consequences. Additionally, the racial bias that is prevalent among caseworkers has influenced the rate at which families of color come into contact with child welfare systems as well as the quality of services they receive once the intervention is underway.^{35, 36, 37}

Although any individual *could* be negatively affected by the aftermath of a marijuana misdemeanor, racially-biased law enforcement and social institutions ensure that Black and Latino New Yorkers overwhelmingly bear the brunt of these collateral consequences.

Wasted Resources

Adding insult to injury, marijuana prohibition imposes the onerous financial and administrative burden of enforcement and incarceration primarily on cash-strapped state and local governments.

Enforcing marijuana possession laws is estimated to have cost New York \$675 million in 2010 alone.³⁸ According to Professor Levine, it costs between \$1,000 and \$2,000 in police, court, and jail costs to process a simple marijuana arrest in NYC.³⁹ From 2002 to 2012, NYC spent nearly \$1 billion arresting people for possessing small amounts of marijuana.⁴⁰ The huge number of arrests drains scarce resources at enormous cost to taxpayers.⁴¹

More than half of those in treatment for marijuana nationally are referred by the criminal justice system and likely did not need or want treatment.⁴² Fixing New York's marijuana laws would save hundreds of millions every year, which could be reinvested into job training, education, and healthcare.

Youth Access

Under prohibition, there are no age restrictions for purchasing marijuana; no one checks IDs to ensure an individual is old enough to buy. Prohibition has been largely ineffective and often counterproductive in reducing marijuana access or use among young people.⁴³ As a result, young people are more likely to have access to marijuana than adults,⁴⁴ and consequently face premature introduction to the criminal justice system.

Due to prohibition, there is also a lack of honest public education that makes it impossible to ensure youth are educated properly on marijuana, ways to take a safety-first approach, or the collateral consequences that may accompany a marijuana arrest.

No Oversight of Production or Quality Control

Under prohibition, there are no safety or quality controls for production. Marijuana bought and sold on the illicit market is not tested for adulterants or potency, and consumers often can't verify what they're getting.

Lack of Harm Reduction Options

As a result of marijuana's criminalization, harm reduction options that exist for problematic alcohol consumption – such as easily accessible information about how alcohol dosage affects physical and mental functioning – are not available for marijuana use.⁴⁵

The SMART Choice: Fixing NY's Approach to Marijuana through Regulated Access

Without reform, New York will continue to fall behind changing public opinion and responsible policymaking regarding marijuana. It is time for New York to fix its broken marijuana policies and repair the harm caused by the war on drugs. It is time to end prohibition.

By ending prohibition through legalization, New York can create a system of *regulation* – similar to alcoholic beverages, but specific to marijuana – complete with municipal flexibility, age limits, licensing requirements, quality controls and other restrictions.^{46, 47} Under regulation, there is control over how and where marijuana is produced, distributed, sold, taxed, and consumed.

Pass Legislation to End Prohibition and Establish a Well-Regulated, Inclusive Marijuana Industry

By passing legislation to end prohibition and regulate marijuana in New York, lawmakers can:

- End the unfair, wasteful, harmful practice of arresting people for marijuana possession.
- Reduce the number of people facing barriers to employment, public housing, custody of their children, and human services as a result of marijuana arrests.
- Prevent families from being separated by deportation or loss of custody due to marijuana arrests.
- Save millions of taxpayer dollars by reducing law enforcement costs.
- Create thousands of new jobs through a new legal market.
- Provide better access to medical marijuana for patients.
- Generate millions more in revenue for education, job training and human services.
- Repair the harm caused by the war on drugs and mass incarceration by investing revenue from the legal marijuana market into communities for job training, economic empowerment, and youth development programming.

- Protect youth by preventing access to marijuana and eliminating a common reason for introduction to the criminal justice system.
- Encourage safety through quality control, harm reduction options, and public education.

The NY State Legislature should make the SMART choice: End prohibition, create a system to tax and regulate marijuana, and repair and reinvest in communities most harmed by the war on marijuana by voting for the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act.

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¹⁰ *Marihuana Reform Act of 1977*, Public Law 360, 1977-1978 Legislature, Regular Session (29 June 1977).

¹¹ Harry Levine and Deborah Small, *Marijuana Arrest Crusade: Racial Bias and Police Policy in New York City, 1997 - 2007*, (New York: New York Civil Liberties Union, 2008), pp 38 - 45.

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¹⁶ Demographics for New York State taken from the United States Census Bureau Quick Facts. Available at:

<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/36>

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