SHOW ME GREEN

By Grace Snelling, Katie Snelling, Sara Stemmler and Lila Taylor
with reporting by Michael Bernard and Daniel Cohen

As of 2017, the psychoactive drug marijuana has been legalized in some way in 29 states and Washington D.C. Eight states and the capital have legalized the drug for recreational use. While cannabis is still federally illegal and not yet regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, many states are passing new legislation to legalize marijuana – and Missouri could be next. The Globe investigates the facets of this controversial story and how it applies to Clayton as well as the rest of Missouri. This issue is one that hits close to home now more than ever.

✶ NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE ANONYMITY OF THE INDIVIDUALS

CLAYTON

"All of my money. All the cash that I get or steal from my parents goes towards marijuana," CHS student Jane* said.

As the push to legalize marijuana increases across the US, the effect of this psychoactive drug on the student body at CHS has become more apparent. Based on a recent student survey conducted by the Globe, 69 percent of the student body know someone who has smoked or consumed marijuana.

CHS sophomore Hunter Chestnut Perry is among the 77 percent of Clayton students who have not smoked marijuana. His declination to smoke is especially unique considering his roots in Boulder, Colorado. Perry moved to St. Louis from Boulder in August of 2016 to begin his freshman year. While visiting Colorado for the summer before returning at the beginning of this school year, weed culture in Colorado and in Missouri became more astoundingly distinct to him.

"People talk about it a lot in [St. Louis], but I haven't personally seen anyone do it here - I don't really hang out with people who [smoke marijuana], but [in CO], it's just in the open everywhere," Perry said. "You walk down the street and there will be a bunch of people doing it on the sidewalk, or at bus stops, or anywhere basically."

Perry is not the only one who has noticed the seemingly casual public use of marijuana in Colorado. In fact, many are concerned that the use of cannabis products, especially in teens, has become too casual, increasing the risk for medical repercussions in users. It was certainly not always this way. Perry noted a palpable change in weed culture both before and after the introduction of Amendment 64 to the Constitution of the State of Colorado, or the legalization of recreational use of marijuana back in 2012.

"There were still a lot of people who still did it before it was legalized, but they tried to hide it a lot, where now, if you go there, I'd be surprised if I didn't see someone doing it every day," Perry said.

Although he has a history of being widely exposed to cannabis products, Perry continues to refrain from smoking due to both family history and the awareness of possible medical repercussions.

"It's mostly because of basketball. A few of my uncles used to be pretty good at basketball, and they started smoking and kinda lost interest in school and activities, and just got super lazy, and I just didn't want to go down that path, so I stay away from it. It's mostly health related," he said.

Although Perry himself does not participate in cannabis related activities, he is familiar with people who regularly participate in such activities, some even coming to social gatherings already high.

"I know one dude who, he was at a party, and he was underage so he wasn't supposed to have it, and cops showed up, and he dove out of a two-story window, through the glass, and his stomach got all cut up so he has like 56 stitches in his stomach from the glass, and he got arrested for a night, but he was bailed out," Perry said.

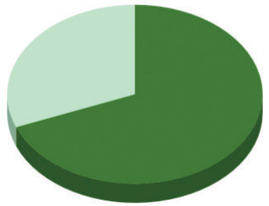
Perry attempts, however, to make sure his friends are not actively smoking while they are hanging out, a task that is becoming more difficult with students' increasing exposure to marijuana products.

Similarly to Perry, Clay Butler, a junior at CHS, has watched his friends become more interested in alcohol and marijuana, and believes that use of these substances almost always has negative consequences. As someone who does not smoke or drink, Butler often feels like an outlier.

"If you go to a party and you don't smoke or drink, most likely your friends are gonna be like, 'okay, we're not gonna peer pressure you but it's always gonna be here!' and they are obviously edging you towards it, they want you to do it, consciously or subconsciously they're gonna try to push it on you," Butler said.

At Clayton, Butler noted, drinking and smoking is somewhat normalized.

"I do think every high school has a unique atmosphere about it. What I've noticed is that in Clayton, the parties are usually in a space where [drinking and smoking] is not frowned upon by the parents. It's more like, the parents are trying to create that 'safe space' but whenever you have underage drinking, it's never a good idea and stupid stuff is gonna happen," Butler said. "I can't really speak for every high school, just Clayton, but it seems like it's very well known who does it and which groups do it together, and it's very open. It's kind of shocking how Clayton hasn't had any type of [student-centered] drug prevention program at all, the most we get is a few times a year we talk about it. The people who don't want to drink are afraid to voice their opinion about."



7 OUT OF EVERY 10 CLAYTON STUDENTS KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS SMOKED MARIJUANA.

To further educate his peers about the negative effects of substance abuse, as well as to show other students (especially underclassmen) that it is okay to avoid smoking and drinking, Butler has joined an initiative called Tri Putting Off Drinking (TRIPOD). Students who join this initiative are taught an hour long lesson by the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (NCADA) about substance abuse, which they are then able to teach to their classmates. Butler hopes that this program will help to increase awareness about alcohol and drugs in the Clayton community.

Although some Clayton students share Perry and Butler's views on marijuana, Jane believes most students have tried smoking at least once.

"Everyone smokes. I do think a lot of people [at Clayton]

Photo by Michael Melinger

smoke," Jane said.

Jane has been smoking marijuana for about a year now, and smokes about once a day during the school year and four to five times a day during the summer. Although she was initially wary about being caught with the illegal substance, smoking and consuming marijuana has become a more casual experience for her.

"When I first started smoking I was so worried, I was so worried about where I was smoking, who I was smoking with, when I was going home," Jane said. "Now I just like … smoke while I'm walking down the street. I do. I smoke at my house, I smoke anywhere."

Jane usually purchases about five grams of marijuana once every two weeks, which she smokes in a group with her friends. This costs her at least $100 per month, and she sometimes has to steal money from her parents to cover the price. According to Jane, because of the amount of money that is involved in these transactions, it is typical for dealers to over-price their marijuana, especially if the buyers are freshmen and do not know any better.

"What happens is either you get an unfair price, you get an unfair amount, [the dealer] is like … really bad about meeting you, and then lastly they take forever to respond to you," she said.

For many dealers at CHS, the process of obtaining and selling drugs has proved dangerous. CHS alum Frank* began dealing at the age of 17, when he met a worker at a Clayton restaurant who offered to help him become a dealer by connecting him with other local adult dealers (he has since stopped dealing).

"I [moved] 2.5 ounces a week," Frank said. "It's pretty laid back. Nobody cares except the cops."

While still dealing, Frank made approximately $500 per week only through drug transactions. Often, dealing put him in threatening situations.

"I was picking up from a dude. Then this guy pulled out a gun [on me]. He told me to give him all my money and weed. I told him to go away," he said.

Although the gun was not loaded and Frank was unharmed, he was shaken by the altercation.

Other students recount similar experiences. Jason*, a student at CHS, is friends with multiple dealers who have been threatened by suppliers.

"Even in high school … even if you try to screw over like, a high school dealer, they might pull up to your house with a gun. [A dealer I know] pulled a knife on my friend," Jason said.

The basic understanding of the Clayton drug trade is as follows: a student or recent graduate of Clayton or a neighboring St. Louis high school purchases in larger quantities from adults, and then resells that product to students at Clayton who they are in contact with.

"High school dealers buy from somebody in the area and they'll ask for a hookup and the high school dealers try to buy in bulk, so typically they'll buy a couple of ounces maybe so that they can just sell it and they don't have to continuously keep buying," Jason said.

Eric Selig, a criminal defense attorney in the St. Louis area, has an awareness of the drug culture because of his career in law. He has sat in with Federal Bureau of Investigation(FBI) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents alike due to many of the clients he has represented.

"I'm aware that there's a cartel in California, and there's a cartel in Mexico, that do some supplying of drugs to the St. Louis area," Selig said. "I'm aware of drugs coming in from California, and drugs coming from Colorado, and coming to this area."

With the changing prohibition surrounding marijuana from state to state, cannabis products are coming into Missouri from places such as Colorado and California, which was not as common 20 years ago before any type of legalization had occurred. Although the sources of marijuana may be changing, there has not been an influx of marijuana being brought into the state of Missouri due to legalization in other states around the country.

"I don't think there's an increase, like all of a sudden there's more marijuana because, let's say California and Colorado and Washington State, and Washington D.C have legalized recreational marijuana," Selig said. "I don't think that has led to more marijuana here. I think it's possible that that has led to more sources where marijuana comes here from, it takes away some of the marijuana that came here to St. Louis from drug cartels in Mexico. So I don't think it's increased the amount, I think that maybe the sources are just a little different."

Drug smugglers are finding more creative ways to smuggle marijuana products across state lines. While the transportation and distribution of cannabis may be legal in one state, as soon as a border is crossed, a felony could be committed by doing the same action.

"People have been caught coming to St. Louis with trashbags full of marijuana, others with a pickup truck filled with what looked like packages that looked like presents, and bags that look like luggage, and are coming into this area," Selig said. "And because some or another got caught by the police because they claimed they smelled something, then all of a sudden, they are searching the packages and are finding drugs, and the guys with the trash bags came from Colorado, and the guy with the duffel bags and packages that were wrapped with vacuum-sealed bricks of marijuana, came from California."

Sergeant Tim Ware, of the St. Louis County Police Bureau of Drug Enforcement, spoke of the legal process these drug traders go through when caught by the police. The St. Louis County Drug Task Force is responsible for investigating possible possessions and/or distributions of illegal substances, such as marijuana.

"Detectives assigned to the St. Louis County Multi-Jurisdictional Drug Task Force use a combination of information/complaints from citizens, the area police precinct, informants or crime trends to initiate criminal investigations for the illegal distribution or possession of controlled substances," Ware said. "The investigations can result in the execution of state or federal search warrants. After an investigation is completed, all evidence is then turned over to local or federal prosecutors for consideration of charges. Anytime a person is found to be in possession of a controlled substance they are arrested. "

Missouri follows the trend of other states that are sans marijuana legalization. Ware and Selig both agree that there is no increase in marijuana in Missouri; there is only a change in the sources from which it is brought to the state from.

"Marijuana distribution and possession occurs in the St. Louis area just as much in any other area of the country except maybe states with legalized marijuana," Ware said. "The amount has not changed [due to legalization in other states], but legalized marijuana has allowed the same people to obtain it in a different location."

While the Drug Task Force is responsible for marijuana possession investigations, they tend to spend the majority of their time focusing on solving cases involving other, more dangerous drugs.

"In Missouri marijuana is considered a controlled substance," Ware said. "We investigate these cases like any other. Currently due to the deadly impacts of heroin we have concentrated our investigations to the controlled substances that may be killing more people."

" I WAS PICKING UP FROM A DUDE. THEN THIS GUY PULLED OUT A GUN 'ON ME'. HE TOLD ME TO GIVE HIM ALL MY MONEY AND WEED. I TOLD HIM TO GO AWAY. "

The CHS Administration is aware that drug use, and especially consumption of marijuana, is a problem among high school students. However, according to Assistant Principal Ryan Luhning, finding marijuana in a student's possession while at school is rare.

"I've been here 12 years, seven years of being in charge of discipline, and through our searches, we've only ever found small amounts of marijuana on campus, or prescription drugs, but for the most part, it's usually not on campus. Clayton is a wonderful place, and we give you guys a ton of freedom with the open campus. I think most kids would be smart enough to go someplace else to do something like that, if they were to make a drug exchange, or if they were going to use, they would make sure it doesn't come back on campus. Even the kids we have caught while under the influence, they usually don't have anything on their person at the time," Luhning said.

Although the School District lacks jurisdiction over drug deals or drug use that occurs outside of school, it does have the ability to perform searches if there is reasonable suspicion that a student has taken drugs unto the campus.

"If someone says they have a tip, that they saw someone smoking in the bathroom, okay, so if you saw this, if you visibly saw this, that would give me enough reasonable suspicion to search the locker, search the student, search the vehicle … that's all you really need is reasonable suspicion, is what the courts give," Luhning

Photo by Michael Melinger

said.

If a student is caught with drugs in their possession, they can be given a maximum of 10 days of suspension. This suspension can be shortened if the student participates in a screening at the NCADA. Expulsion, according to Luhning, is very rare and always a last resort.

"I've been here 12 years, there's been one expulsion. I think in the previous 100 years, there has only been one expulsion. That would be a last resort for the School District of Clayton. It's very rare to expel anyone. The Collaborative School is always an option for us."

In Luhning's previous experiences working at Vianney, a private school, it was typical for students to be expelled if they could not meet the academic and behavior standards that the school set. In this sense, students at Vianney lacked the rights that Clayton students have.

"So a lot different in terms of rights for public school students versus private school students. I like the fact that we allow you guys to be young people who learn and grow, and if you make mistakes, we try to help you through that. We're not going to expel, we're going to try to get you help with an alcohol or drug problem with the NCADA to rehabilitate and help people, not just shoo them off to the side. It's just different, those two types of experiences in my administrative career."

Although national attention on the use of marijuana has increased in recent years, data from the health surveys distributed by CHS indicate that marijuana use is declining, Luhning said.

"National data says that teenagers these days are the safest. They use less drugs, they use less alcohol, school's more important to them, than any generation before. It looks to me like things are getting better, you know, statistically. My eye test tells me that there is still a lot of marijuana use, so it's hard to tell what the statistics and data says. I do think this generation is more knowledgeable on alcohol, drugs, those types of things."

MEDICAL

Medical marijuana has been legalized in 29 states. In some circumstances, patients are turning to marijuana as an alternative treatment option. Marijuana used in non-medical cases still has effects on both the adolescent and adult brains. Richard Grucza, Professor of Psychiatry at Washington University, explained the discrepancies between teen and adult use of cannabis.

"In terms of how the drug makes a person feel or behave, I don't know that there are differences, but what we worry about is just the developing adolescent brain that might be much more susceptible to the rewarding or reinforcing effects of marijuana or any drug," she said.

While Grucza and other researchers have not seen significant differences between teens and adults regarding behaviors evoked by the drug, the use of marijuana by an adolescent can lead to dangerous predicaments, because in many cases, teens are using marijuana in social situations.

"Teenage use, as well as, probably the combination of intense marijuana use and teen behavior in general, teens tend to be more impulsive than adults. I believe there's a situation in Colorado where a young person, I'm not sure if it was a teenager, took much more cannabis than he had intended and wound up jumping off of a roof," Gruzca said. "Those are the sorts of things, those sort of accidental behaviors that can happen incidentally to marijuana use. We tend to worry a lot more about teenagers, they're usually using it not in the privacy of their home, but out where they won't be caught, so that will tend to create more dangerous situations than if they were simply using it at home as adults."

In terms of the effects of the drug and its addictive qualities, Grucza said, "It is definitely addictive and we're seeing that more and more people voluntarily receive treatment, whether that's because it is becoming more potent and more addictive or because the greater awareness of its addictive potential is open to question. There's a self-help group created by marijuana users similar to AA, so certainly some abusers recognize that they have a problem. I would say it is comparable to or slightly more addictive than alcohol. It's a hard thing to measure because we can't do experiments on human beings to see how they react to long term exposure to a drug. It is true that it is nearly impossible to overdose on marijuana, that being said it can be a very impairing drug, especially for people who do not have a high tolerance and certainly that degree of impairment can put people into life threatening situations."

Studies have revealed that impairment from the drug can lead to unsafe driving, but the extent to which the drug effects driving has yet to be fully discovered.

"It's really hard, actually, to measure the degree to which marijuana impairs driving because when you do a blood test on somebody for marijuana, you don't know if they are impaired, you only know that they have used in the past 24 hours, you don't really have a precise measure of how impaired they might be," Grucza said. "They [people under the influence of marijuana] don't drive sort of recklessly like people under the influence of alcohol do, but there tends to be a lot of sway in and out of the lane. So they're certainly not driving as intently under the influence."

Regarding the legalization of medical and recreational, Grucza explained that legalization of medical marijuana has, in some instances, been a back door to recreational legalization.

In California, prior to the legalization of recreational marijuana, "two percent of the adult population had medical licenses and there were literally more medical conditions that were approved to be treated with marijuana than there are medical conditions period," Grucza said. "It was really more of a means of just getting the industry established and allowing people to use it if they so choose."

Grucza emphasized that the spectrum of legality is not simply the opposition of legal and illegal, but the extent to which states choose to regulate the cannabis industry.

"Just by studying what we have, with respect to marijuana we can see that it is not just simply the question of legal versus not legal," Grucza said. "It is the question of how much we're going to regulate it and how easy we're going to create that access and how much we're going to allow for profit industries to develop to supply."

Marijuana not only affects the human brain, but also the economy and criminal justice system. According to Grucza, the enlargement of the marijuana industry could lead to disparities in punishment depending on the state.

"As far as recreational use, [. . .] I think about 95 percent of people in the research community are concerned about how we treat marijuana users or any drug users in our society, not only the severity of the punishment but the arbitrariness with which it is met, the racial disparities and so forth," Gruzca said. "For example, one option that a number of states have implemented somewhat quietly in the last five or ten years is the criminalization where, instead of going to prison or even getting something on your criminal record, that person gets something equivalent to a traffic ticket. Personally, I think adults should probably be able to use if they so choose."

Though research mostly supports that marijuana is, for the most part, a less harmful drug than alcohol.

"There might be a few areas where we can make exceptions to that rule, but we can't really say we have a policy based on evidence that alcohol is readily available and cannabis is completely banned," Grucza explained. "But I also share the concern that most researchers have, which is do we really want another industry like the tobacco or alcohol industry that becomes such a powerful entity that it becomes impossible to regulate?"

Julie Knost from the NCADA shared a similar perspective to Grucza in terms of effects of cannabis on the teenage and adult brain.

"All substances impact teens differently than adults, because the teenage brain is still developing. Risk of addiction is greater for teenagers and for marijuana 1 in 6 teenagers will become addicted," Knost said. "Marijuana binds to many areas of the brain and some of the areas most impacted are memory, learning and coordination. Marijuana reacts with the reward center of the brain, making the brain have a pleasant reaction, initially. Prolonged use of marijuana changes the brain and causes the brain to become dependent on the substance for reward."

However, the view of the NCADA regarding legalization was different.

"Drug and alcohol misuse—especially among young people—are major public health concerns. Legalizing marijuana and selling it the way alcohol or tobacco are sold would increase its availability, normalize its use and lead to increased negative health consequences, especially among young users," Knost said.

"NCADA is concerned about any policy change that would lead to an increase in teen use of marijuana, so we are opposed to any legalization plan that would allow for marijuana's commercial sale."

The NCADA is troubled that legalization of marijuana could lead to more access to the drug in the adolescent community. The NCADA has community and school based lessons to educate the public about the effects of marijuana. Medical marijuana is a controversial mode of alternative treatment, as organizations such as the Food and Drug Administratio, have not approved any form of botanical marijuana.

Although controversy surrounds the legalization of medical marijuana, many people benefit from the drug's legalization.

Eight-year-old Grace Bruno has been one of many patients to use and benefit from forms of the alternative treatment. Bruno has, according to her mother, Jamie, "thrived since starting the oil."

"Grace was diagnosed with Infantile Spasms when she was five months old," Jaime said. "Her condition is now called Intractable Epilepsy. Before moving to Colorado, she was having 500-1000 seizures per day. We moved to Colorado four years ago and Grace is 8-years-old now, even though she looks really small."

Tetrahydrocannabinol(THC) is the active chemical in marijuana and cannabis products. This compound is responsible for the psychological effects that marijuana has on the brain.

"Grace is on a high CBD oil called Haleigh's Hope," said Jaime. "It is whole plant, but only contains 3 percent THC. We also give Grace THC and CBN oils for sleep."

The forms of THC based oils Grace uses were never recommended to the Bruno family by any medical professionals, however, after researching alternative treatment, it was decided that CBD oil was the best option for Grace.

For the Bruno family, it was difficult to obtain this alternative treatment.

"We had to leave our lives, sell our home and move our family to Colorado to legally access the oil for Grace," Jamie said. "Fourteen prescription medications had failed to control her seizures, so this was our last hope."

Photo of Grace Bruno from Jamie Bruno.

ECONOMICS

The controversy surrounding marijuana has captured the public's attention for the past decade, if not longer. Many have considered the political issues revolving around the passage of the law itself, as well as the social issues involving the use of marijuana for students; even the medical effects the drug has on the body should one choose to ingest it. Few, however, have considered the vast affect that legalization would have on the economy.

In states where recreational marijuana use is legal, dispensaries are highly regulated in terms of who has the ability to purchase cannabis products and the process by which they are able to make these purchases.

Highland Health is a dispensary based in Trinidad, Colorado that sells marijuana for the sole purpose of recreational use. The company receives their product from a variety of outside growers sourced in Colorado.

"As far as the customers go, when a customer comes into our store, they have to present us with a valid state-issued ID, such as a driver's license, an identification card or a passport. It has to be valid and not expired and they have to be over the age of 21. After that, we can let them into the restricted area in the back where all of the product actually is. Once they pick what they are going to purchase, they present their identification again to the person that actually sells the product and then they proceed with the sale," Highland Health employee Jessi Smith said.

If customers do not follow these guidelines, they are quickly turned away.

"Personally, I have never had anyone who was under the age of 21 come in and try to get in the store," Smith said. "We have had to turn people away because they did not have valid identification. That's a daily thing."

Products at Highland Health vary from multiple strains of cannabis flower to edibles and shake (pieces of cannabis and stems which is most often used as a topping on blunts). Prices vary based on the type and quality of the product.

"Our price range is anywhere from $7 dollars for shakes to $15 for our top-shelf," Smith said.

Prices are also affected by the taxes that are in place in the city or county in which the cannabis is purchased. In Trinidad, the tax on recreational marijuana is 24 percent. This amount varies throughout Colorado and in other states where marijuana is legalized. Taxes on medical marijuana are typically much lower than taxes on recreational marijuana. In many parts of Colorado, the tax can be as low as four percent. The influence of these taxes can be widespread.

Peter Rudy of the Oregon Department of Education believes in the importance of tax revenue derived from marijuana purchases to fund education.

Oregon operates on a biennial budget, meaning that every two years, lawmakers appropriate funds to wherever they see fit. In the 2017 legislative session, a budget was approved for the 2017-2019 biennium, including $74.3 million in funds from the sale of marijuana to go towards the Oregon Department of Education. Because marijuana sales are a big source of funding for Oregon's schools, the Department of Education has an intuitive system that distributes these massive funds into categories of education that need it the most.

"Districts receive money based on a formula that takes into effect the number of students plus factors that can increase the cost of educating those students," Rudy said.

Irl Scissors, a Missouri lobbyist, has a much more philosophical view on the economic benefits that are correlated with the decriminalization and legalization of marijuana.

"If you look at these other states, you see the economy that has been created," Scissors said.

He found that major revenue is being brought in from the marijuana market, in states such as Oregon and Colorado, where medical and recreational use of marijuana has been legalized. Revenue is being drawn in from sources as little as taxes placed on the consumption of marijuana in states where it is legal.

"If you look at Oregon, if you look at the state of Colorado, the taxes that are brought in by people purchasing it for whatever the law is in that state, you're looking at millions if not billions of dollars in tax revenue that's generated."

A contrast was also noted between the state of the economy in states where marijuana is legalized and states where it is not.

"A lot of states are having trouble balancing their budgets to cover health care, to cover the people who are employed by the state, or need benefits from the state," Scissors said.

The aforementioned massive tax revenue brought in by the exchange and intake of marijuana is mending major sources of deficit in state programs that would otherwise appear unaffected by the marijuana trade.

"When you see other state's tax on marijuana consumption, and you see all of the money that it's generating, those states are able to put the money towards education, things like that which states like Missouri really struggle with," Scissors said.

Furthermore, Scissors reflected on the internal growth of the marijuana trade itself, and what is has done to improve to socio-economic status of many citizens in states where it is legal.

"Jobs and the economy are one thing, the number of dispensaries, what goes in with regard to these dispensaries, all of the product, obviously, but then you have the companies that manufacture all of the packaging for the product, and all of these different businesses because of this new development in the state," Scissors said.

Although admitting the medical and social issues that would arise with the legalization of recreational marijuana in Missouri, such as underage use and overuse, Scissors believes the ends justify the means in terms of economic repair in Missouri, specifically the increase in educational funding.

"In my experience, in Missouri, where we struggle every year to balance the state budget, to fully fund the education formula, which basically funds our schools in urban areas, in rural areas, it doesn't matter," Scissors said. "The schools require funding. If there are opportunities to generate new revenue in the state that would increase funding for schools and help programs and things like that, then I'm up for giving it a try."

Photo by Michael Melinger

LEGALIZATION

Twenty-nine states have legalized marijuana to be prescribed by doctors for patients. Eight of those states have also legalized the drug to be used by adults recreationally, much like alcohol or cigarettes. The remodeled drug culture and climate surrounding marijuana in the United States is one that is fueled not only by new generations with different perspectives, but by revenue brought in by cannabis sales, along with changing prohibition acts throughout the nation's states. Will Missouri be next? What should Missouri citizens be looking for on the political horizon?

Marijuana was a drug brought over to the new world by Spanish settlers back in the 1500's. After the Mexican revolution in the 1910's, the United States saw a large influx of Mexican immigrants coming across the border, who, unsurprisingly, brought some of their culture with them. One of these customs was cannabis, which was used as a natural medicine and relaxant.

In the 1930's, negative propaganda paired with a surge of nationalism caused many Americans to associate cannabis with Mexican immigration, and began to criminalize it. The term "marihuana" was used by politicians in order to associate this increasingly unpopular and controversial drug with Mexico and its immigrants.

The media and "yellow journalism," or the embellishment and exaggeration of facts in journalism, played a large part in the criminalization of marijuana. False claims were made the stated that cannabis caused men of color to become violent and sexually target women. Other false propaganda was used to scare the public and deport Mexicans, such as the connotation that Mexicans brought their dangerous and disruptive behavior over the border with them, which included marijuana. States began to criminalize cannabis one by one, and by 1933, 29 states had banned the use of marijuana.

In 1937, the Marijuana Tax Act was passed, which effectively prohibited marijuana sales in the U.S. through an immensely high excise, that of which applied to recreational users, patients, and physicians alike.

Throughout the rest of the 20th century, marijuana became know as a gateway drug, stereotypically used by "hippies" and college students. The Reagan Administration as well as the "Just Say No" movement created even more negative connotations surrounding the drug in the 1980's.

It wasn't until 1996 when California legalized the medical use of marijuana that the decriminalization movement began to take hold.

Today, the laws surrounding marijuana vary greatly from state to state. In one state, an adult over the age of 21 could purchase marijuana at a store that merely asks to see identification. That same adult, just across the border in a neighboring state, could be fined up to $150,000 and receive a maximum of two years of incarceration for the same transaction. In other states, the punishment surrounding possession of marijuana resembles that of a parking ticket.

In Missouri, the possession of less than 10 grams of marijuana or less is considered a misdemeanor and for a first offense, punishable for up to $500 in fines. A second offense or a larger quantity may result in incarceration for up to a year, as well as a larger fine. But for how long will this be the case?

For many states in the U.S., it is not. For instance, California has legalized marijuana for both recreational and medical use. While many are supportive of this action, there is also a large population which opposes the legalization of marijuana and cannabis products. Carla Lowe, of the Citizens Against Legalization of Marijuana, also known as CALM, has been fighting the legalization of

Photo by Michael Melinger

marijuana for 41 years.

"A grave concern of our group is the damage that it is doing to to undeveloped brain," Lowe said. "The known impact of THC on undeveloped brains, especially students, has shown to result in a lesser IQ. And you don't get that back."

Lowe and other volunteers were able to halt the legalization of cannabis back in 2010, but in 2016, they were defeated. Recreational marijuana was made legal in the state of California.

"We fought valiantly, all of us volunteers seven years ago in 2010 and decided we needed to organize as a political action committee and we raised some money and we tried to tell the people that we worked with locally why legalizing marijuana would be bad, and we won," Lowe said. "But then last year, we couldn't fight $28 million. That was the money that was spent on radio, TV, and buying votes. You can't compete against that."

Jack Cardetti from New Approach Missouri–an organization that is working to legalize medical marijuana in Missouri– is confident that the drug will be available for medical use in the near future.

"Twenty-nine other states allow doctors to recommend medical marijuana to patients with debilitating illnesses," Cardetti said. "What our campaign, New Approach Missouri, is doing, is trying to make Missouri the 30th state that would allow for this."

There are two different ways that a bill can become a law. New Approach Missouri is currently going through the initiative process, as opposed to having the Missouri Senate, House, and Governor vote on the bill.

"Currently we're going through the initiative petition process," Cardetti said. "The initiative petition process allows citizens to gather signatures, six out of eight of Missouri's congressional districts, and place a constitutional amendment on the ballot. We're out in the field getting signatures right now; we hope to be done getting signatures in January, well before the May 6 deadline. That would put this issue on the November 2018 ballot in Missouri."

Once an issue is placed on the ballot, it's up to the people to vote.

"There's overwhelming public support," Cardetti said. "If you look at all of the public polling done in the state, we're up in the 60s and 70%. Really getting it on our ballot is our biggest hurdle. Once it's on the ballot, we feel confident that Missourians will rally to support this."

This isn't the first time that medical marijuana has tried to be legalized. Most recently, a bill was proposed and voted upon in the House of Missouri Representatives in Jefferson City. The bill was shut down by the House before it was able to reach the senate or the governor.

"Two years ago, there was a very serious effort in Missouri, not by our group," Cardetti said. "It got through, and actually got a vote on the House floor and it was defeated on the House floor. Even the House is more supportive of this issue than the Missouri senate is. Getting something through the legislature, that's just not probable at this point."

In addition to that failed effort, New Approach Missouri has tried in the past to legalize medical marijuana, and have been unsuccessful.

"The last election cycle, the 2016 cycle, was really the most serious effort to get this on the ballot," Cardetti said. "Our group did try to get signatures, but we fell just short of the signature collection goal. So this year we started a year earlier in the cycle so that we can be assured that we make the ballot."

This year, New Approach Missouri plans to succeed.

"Missourians want to have this medical treatment option," Cardetti said. "For instance, with a drug petition, there will be 4 percent retail tax on medical marijuana from dispensaries, and those funds will go towards veterans and health care in the state of Missouri, which is something that is really underfunded in the state of Missouri."

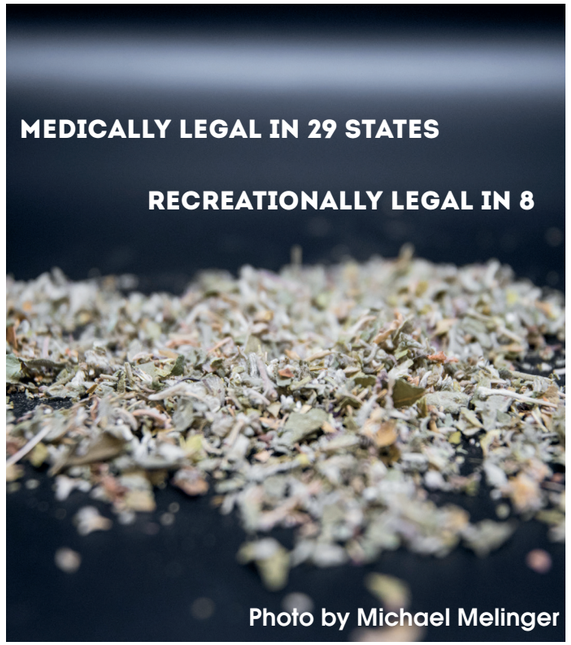


Photo by Michael Melinger

As well as veterans health care funds, the legalization of medical marijuana will change the people in control of the drug; that power will shift from politicians to physicians.

"The primary [benefit] is that it puts control of healthcare and medical treatment options back exactly where it should be, and that's between a state licensed physician, an M.D. or a D.O. and a patient who has a debilitating illness," Cardetti said. "Right now we have politicians and bureaucrats deciding what medical treatments should be, and we need to put doctors back in charge and that's exactly what this initiative petition should do."

While New Approach Missouri is working tirelessly to legalize medical marijuana, there are no serious or apparent efforts fighting for the legalization of recreational marijuana at this time.

"From experience from the other states, is if Missouri was ever to go to that step, it would likely have a medical marijuana law in place first," Cardetti said. "Are there people, activists, that really, strongly believe that we should have it? Yeah, absolutely. Are there active groups out there working to make that happen? Not really. The sole focus right now is making Missouri that 30th state that legalizes medical marijuana."

The first step Missouri must take to legalize recreational marijuana is to legalize medical marijuana. While the benefits of the legalization of medical marijuana may be more obvious, the legalization of recreational marijuana has its advantages as well.

Dan Viets, the Board President of New Approach Missouri, supports the legalization of adult, non-medical use of marijuana, yet the organization he is a part of is solely focused on medical legalization.

"The main benefit of the legalization of adult non-medical use of marijuana is that we stop treating millions of our fellow citizens as if they were criminals," Viets said. "This is very similar if not the same as repealing the prohibition of alcohol. It was a federal crime in all but one state, and it led to a tremendous increase in crime and a tremendous disrespect for the law with people who were otherwise law abiding. They thought they had the right to drink a beer or a glass of wine if they wanted to. It also led to far more dangerous forms of alcohol. People were repeating being crippled, blinded, and in some cases killed by alcohol that was in no way regulated or under any kind of control."

The legislation regarding cannabis products in Missouri has resulted in over 107,000 arrests from 2008 to 2012. With over 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States today, Viets and his team are very concerned with how the criminalization of marijuana is doing nothing but increasing those numbers.

"The prohibition of marijuana has a great deal to do with the mass incarceration problem in our country," Viets said. "People are going to prison for smoking a joint. Large numbers of people are going to prison for selling marijuana to other adults or for growing marijuana and that makes no sense."

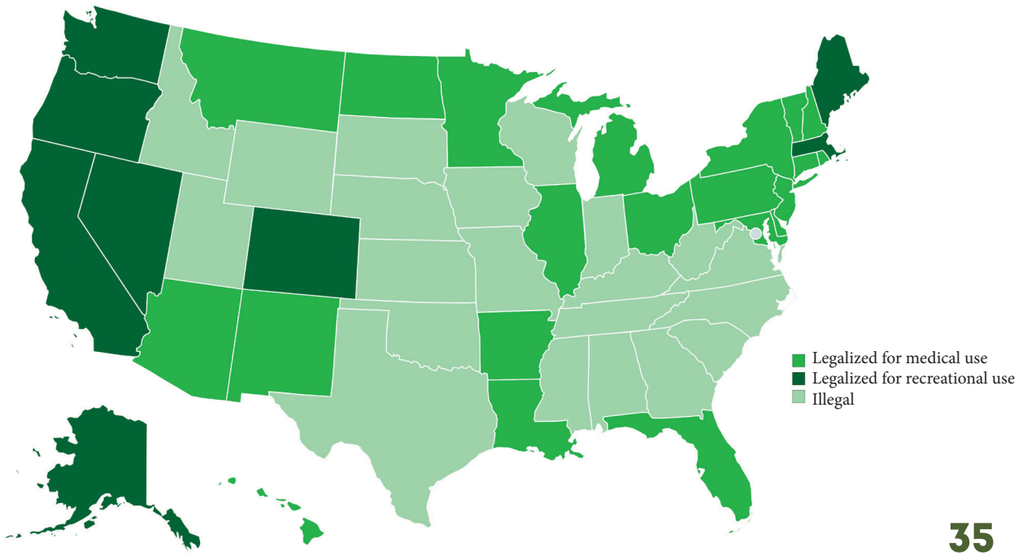
These arrests affect our society in more way than one. Racism is apparent in marijuana arrests, which directly mirrors other issues in the St. Louis community today.

"Statistics show that white people and black people use marijuana at the same rate," Viets said. "Yet black people are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana than white people."

Viets also commented on how legalization has been affecting teenagers and other minors in these legalized states.

"Young people already report that it's harder for them to get marijuana and that it's less available than it was before legalization. One of the reasons for that is that illegal drug dealers never card people. But people who have a license and are legally selling marijuana to adults, they are very, very careful not to sell to minors. And that doesn't mean that it's impossible to minors to get marijuana, just harder. The states that have legalized have already shown reductions in use by teenagers."

According to Viets, in addition to a decrease in the usage of marijuana among minors, there has been no increase in marijuana use by adults in states that have legalized the drug for non-medical use.

"There's no increase in marijuana use. That's so fundamental to understand. Like in the state of Colorado, not only is teenage use down, but adult usage has not increased. And this is counter-intuitive, most people just assume otherwise. If you understand that basic, simple fact–there's no increase in use after legalization– then there would be no increase in any other problem associated with use, and that includes driving.

"The goal is to get rid of criminal prohibition for adult non-medical marijuana," Viets said. "End the the criminal prohibition of responsible marijuana use by adults."