



Why Marijuana Legalization is NOT a Good Idea for Texas

**Houston HIDTA
Prepared by the Houston Investigative Support Center
September 2016**

This document has been prepared to provide easy access to salient facts regarding the serious negative consequences of marijuana legalization in the United States. Lessons learned thus far from Colorado and Washington are outlined in this report, clearly illustrating the public health and safety ramifications, as well as the economic and social burden to states in which use of marijuana has been legalized.

Implications of Marijuana Legalization for Texas

Proponents of legalization argue that concerns about the use of marijuana are exaggerated, but these claims are easily refuted with statistical facts and scientific studies showing that just the opposite is true. With a potency that has tripled from past decades, it is obviously a drug with a much greater potential for abuse, dependency, and addiction than in the past. From rising economic costs for treatment and recovery that would be incurred as usage rates increase, to the immeasurable emotional costs to families whose lives will be impacted by substance abuse, to the sorrow of Texans who will undoubtedly lose loved ones in drug-related traffic fatalities involving marijuana, any potential benefit of legalization would certainly be greatly overshadowed by its substantial risks. Texas simply cannot afford to take this path.

Legalization will endanger the well-being and future of Texas children - its most precious resource and source of pride. Although proponents of legalization assure us that laws relating to recreational marijuana use only impact "responsible" adults ages 21 years of age and older, emergency room and poison center statistics prove that marijuana laws have not been able to shield children and adolescents from its detrimental effects. If legalization solely affected adult users, the percentage of teens reporting past month use of marijuana in states in which it has been legalized would surely not be the highest in the nation.

Those who tout the harmlessness of recreational marijuana use and push for legalization are doing a great disservice to the future of this country. Perception of risk related to marijuana continues to decline as more states vote to legalize this drug, and its use continues to rise. This paves a tempting but treacherous path particularly for adolescents.

Setting aside competing data, philosophical differences, and trending social pressure, there is no urgency to legalize marijuana in Texas. Colorado, Washington, Oregon and others are giving Texas an opportunity to examine the effects of legalization without putting Texans at risk. As evidence supporting the negative impact of legalization continues to amass, it is increasingly clear that staying on course, remaining committed to an investment in excellence, and saying no to legalization is the obvious choice for Texas.

Marijuana Today vs. Marijuana of the Past: A Vastly Different and More Dangerous Drug

Marijuana is the most highly used illicit drug in Texas. Proponents of marijuana legalization may purport that marijuana is a harmless drug, but this is clearly not the case. Here are the facts:

Marijuana is not a safe drug.

The truth is that the use of marijuana is significantly affecting the quality-of-life of Texans – to the extent that it is the drug for which more individuals are seeking treatment services at state-funded facilities than for any other drug type except alcohol.¹

The level of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the chemical that produces the characteristic “high” in marijuana, has risen dramatically in recent years. In addition to increased potency in traditional leafy marijuana, use of products such as marijuana oils and waxes, and marijuana-infused products (edibles) containing an even greater percentage of THC have emerged as popular drug trends.^{2,3} A comparison of marijuana potencies over the year can be seen in the text box below.^{4,5}

Today’s marijuana is much more dangerous than the marijuana of the past. Its potency is triple that of past decades.

The higher potency of today’s marijuana equates to greater risks for users.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “higher THC levels may mean a greater risk of addiction if users are regularly exposing themselves to high doses.”⁶

Marijuana Potency: Then and Now

Potency of Traditional Leafy Marijuana

- In 1995, the average THC potency of traditional leafy marijuana was **4%**.
- In 2013, the average THC potency rose to **12%**.
- In 2015, the average THC level in Colorado’s marijuana was **17%**.
 - Some samples were even found to contain close to **30%** THC.

Potency of Marijuana Concentrates (Oils, Waxes, Marijuana Edibles)

- In 1995, the average THC potency of hash oil was **13%**.
- In 2013, the average THC potency of hash oil was **52%**.
- In 2015, the average THC level in Colorado’s marijuana concentrates was **62%**.

Who Does Legalization Hurt the Most? Sadly... The Answer is Our Children and Youth

It is apparent that although recreational marijuana in Colorado and Washington is intended for use by individuals ages 21 years of age or older, the impact of legalization has NOT remained limited to adults.

Making marijuana more available to adults inadvertently makes it more easily accessible to youth and the harm to children and teens in states that have legalized it is evident. According to the Retail Marijuana Public Health Advisory Committee for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, "there is substantial evidence that more unintended marijuana exposures of children occur in states with increased legal access to marijuana and the exposures can lead to significant clinical effects requiring medical attention."⁷ It is not at all surprising that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American College of Pediatricians (ACP) oppose the legalization of marijuana.^{8,9}

Marijuana legalization is associated with public health threats affecting children such as:^{10,11}

- **Increases in poison center exposure calls**
- **Increases in emergency room visits**
- **Increases in hospital admissions**

A rise in marijuana exposure calls to poison centers in Colorado and Washington have been seen in all age groups since legalization in 2012.^{12,13} While the number of calls regarding children and youth have not been large, they have increased each year. What is particularly disturbing about this trend is that the percentage of total marijuana-related exposure calls involving minors is quite high, distinctly illustrating the inadvertent consequences of legalization to a vulnerable population for which it was not intended.

In Colorado, 51% (117/231) of marijuana exposure calls to the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Center were related to children 0 to 18 years of age in 2015. Youth ages 13 to 19 years old accounted for the highest percentage of marijuana-related calls (26%).¹⁴

In Washington, 46% (126/272) of marijuana-related calls to the Washington Poison Center in 2015 involved individuals less than 19 years of age. The majority of calls (24%) were regarding 13 to 19 year olds who had been exposed to some form of marijuana.¹⁵

The Danger of Marijuana Edibles to Young Children

Marijuana edibles, in particular, are being ingested by young children in states that have legalized marijuana, leading to drug poisoning, illness, and hospitalization.

Marijuana edibles are food items such as THC-laced candies, cookies, and snacks that look virtually identical to conventional treats. Children have innocently mistaken these highly potent marijuana-infused products for regular candy or cookies. Health effects can be much more severe than for adults, due to their smaller size and weight.^{16,17,18}



It is inevitable that if Texas were to legalize marijuana, these dangerous drug products would unintentionally make their way into Texas' tiniest hands and mouths.

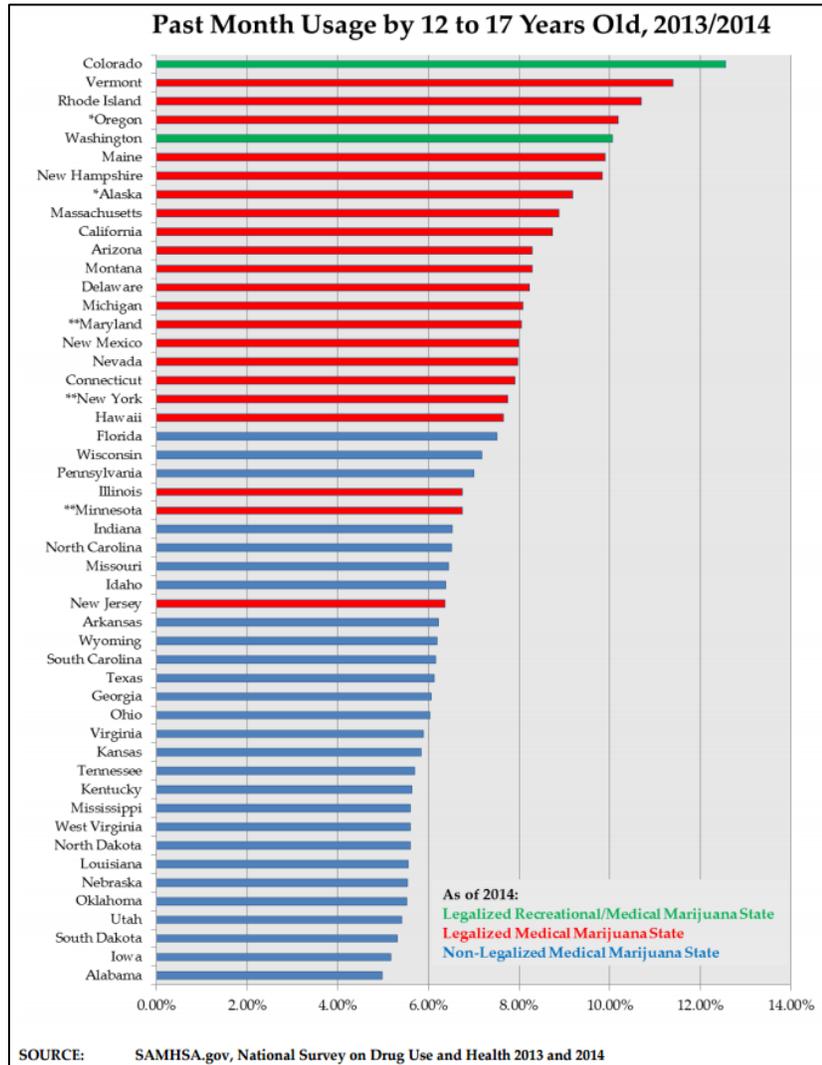
Use of Marijuana by Youth is Highest in “Legal” States

Legalization is contributing to a declining perception of marijuana as a dangerous drug. Prior studies have shown that lower levels of perceived risk are associated with higher drug use rates.^{19,20}

This appears to be quite evident in states in which marijuana has been legalized, particularly for adolescents.

How is marijuana legalization negatively impacting youth in Texas now?

Counselors in Houston have reported that because of all of the pro-legalization media attention, they simply cannot convince adolescents that marijuana use is harmful. The results of the 2015 Monitoring the Future Survey on drug use and attitudes among middle and high school students in the United States confirms that perceived risk of smoking marijuana has continued to decline.²¹ This “normalization” of the use of marijuana is disturbing because at the same time that the perceived risk of using this drug has dropped to its lowest level in years, the marijuana being used now is higher in potency than ever before – and more dangerous! **Legalization of marijuana in Texas would undoubtedly reinforce this false perception and make the problem worse.**



The most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) shows that use of marijuana by adolescents in “legal” states is among the highest in the nation. Colorado teens top the chart in past-month usage at 12.56%, well above the national average of 7.22%.^{22,23,24,25}

In comparison, the percentage of Texas youth reporting marijuana usage is quite low (6.12%).²⁶

Shouldn't we do our best to try to keep it that way?

Marijuana Dependence and Addiction

The Immeasurable Costs of Legalization for Youth

What is known about the harmful outcomes of marijuana use by adolescents?

- Heavy rates of use of marijuana are believed to be associated with an ‘amovitational’ state distinguished by apathy and difficulty concentrating.²⁷ Learning and memory problems associated with regular marijuana use by youth are linked to poor school performance, higher dropout rates, and underachievement of educational pursuits.^{28,29,30}
- Frequent use of marijuana in adolescence has been associated with bleak life outcomes such as increased welfare dependence, greater unemployment, and lower life satisfaction.³¹
- Although proponents of marijuana legalization will tell you that marijuana is not addictive, scientific studies have found that this is absolutely not true, particularly for youth.³² Because the adolescent brain is still developing and is believed to continue to be “under construction” up until the early to mid-twenties, youth are especially susceptible to the harmful effects of marijuana use.³³
- Research has shown that the earlier young people start using marijuana, the greater the likelihood that they will become dependent on marijuana or other drugs later in life.³⁴

When teens use marijuana, they have a much greater chance of developing addiction than adults. 1 in 11 people who try marijuana will become addicted to it. If marijuana use starts in adolescence, the chance of addiction rises to 1 in 6.³⁵

Texas youth are already being negatively affected by marijuana use. Did you know...?

The average age of those in treatment for problems with marijuana at state-funded facilities in Texas is 22 years old. The average age from time of first use until admittance for treatment is eight years (i.e. first use at age 14).

Legalization of marijuana would add fuel to the fire of an already serious drug problem. Why would Texans want to take this risk knowing that marijuana use is already causing significant problems requiring treatment services for teens and young adults? Legalization would result in a further decline in the perception of risk associated with marijuana use, a corresponding rise in use of this drug, and ultimately, a higher level of marijuana dependency and addiction issues for individuals in Texas. The social and emotional costs to individuals and families impacted by drug addiction cannot even begin to be measured. Economic costs would certainly be felt by families and by the state of Texas, as more individuals begin to seek treatment services for problems related to marijuana use.

Cost of State-Funded Marijuana-Related Treatment in Texas in 2015

In 2015, 44,746 individuals were admitted into state-funded treatment programs for drug use in Texas. While the highest percentage entered treatment for primary problems with alcohol (27% or 12,276 people), the second most common drug type was marijuana (22% or 9,918 people). The Department of State Health Services reported that the total cost for marijuana-related treatment services for these 9,918 persons was **over 17 million dollars!** (\$17,049,824)³⁶ Although marijuana was the drug type that was second in admittance ranking, the average cost per person for treatment was higher, leading to an overall cost that was nearly equal to that for alcohol treatment (\$17,231,281).

Certainly legalization would only steepen the price tag for recovery services. The bottom line to consider is this: Who is going to pay for the additional treatment-related costs that will be necessary if marijuana is legalized in Texas?

The Rising Public Safety Threat of Drugged Driving in “Legal” States



The percentage of DUIs and traffic fatalities involving marijuana have risen since marijuana use became legalized in Colorado and Washington.

The lives of too many Texans are already being destroyed by drivers under the influence of alcohol causing fatal crashes. According to the most recent statistics from the National Highway Safety Administration, Texas led the nation in the number of drunk driving deaths in 2014.^{37,38}

Do we really want to add to this public safety threat by legalizing yet another drug in Texas?

Heightened Danger Posed by Driving After Combined Consumption of Both Alcohol and Marijuana

It has been found that when drivers who have used marijuana have also consumed alcohol, the risk of being involved in an accident is higher than from either substance by itself.^{39,40} Since driving under the influence of alcohol is already a serious problem, and driving under the influence of marijuana is increasing in “legal” states, marijuana legalization has the potential to compound the severity of this threat, and endanger yet even more lives in Texas.

- One recent research study found that drivers using marijuana were found to have an increase in lane weaving, poor reaction time, and altered attention to the road. Use of marijuana and alcohol together caused even more lane weaving.⁴¹
- Another study found that using alcohol and marijuana together produces significantly higher blood concentrations of THC than marijuana alone. This may explain the increased performance impairment of drivers that has been seen with marijuana-alcohol combinations.⁴²

DUI Statistics related to Marijuana in “Legal” States

In Colorado and Washington, it is illegal to drive with a concentration of five or more nanograms of THC per milliliter of blood.⁴³ Since legalization, both states have noted increases in the percentage of DUIs involving marijuana.

In Colorado, “when retail marijuana businesses began operating, toxicology reports with positive marijuana results of active THC primarily related to driving under the influence increased 45 percent in only one year.”⁴⁴ In 2015, 77% of Colorado State Patrol’s citations for drug impairment involved marijuana. Forty percent (40%) involved marijuana only.⁴⁵

In Washington, “a study conducted by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration found a statistically significant increase in daytime ‘stoned’ driving in Washington State since its implementation of legal retail marijuana sales in 2014.”⁴⁶

Traffic Fatality Statistics related to Marijuana in “Legal” States

In Colorado, the number of drivers involved in fatal motor vehicle crashes in which the driver’s toxicology results indicated the presence of THC only increased 61%, from 18 in 2013 to 29 in 2014. The number of drivers involved in fatalities who tested positive for THC-only or THC in combination with alcohol and/or other drugs rose from 47 in 2013, to 67 in 2014, and to 88 in 2015. This is an 87% increase from 2013 to 2015. These figures may, in fact, underrepresent the issue, as only half of drivers involved in fatal crashes were tested for drugs.^{47,48}

In Washington, the number and proportion of drivers involved in fatal crashes who had a detectable concentration of THC in their blood that was equal to or greater than five nanograms per milliliter doubled from 49 (8.3%) in 2013 to 106 (17%) in 2014.⁴⁹

Marijuana Production Laboratories in Neighborhoods It's a Recipe for Disaster!

**In Colorado in 2014, 94% of THC extraction laboratory explosions occurred in residential settings.⁵⁰
Legalization would increase the probability of this type of disaster in neighborhoods
in which Texans are raising their families.**

Increased production of marijuana and marijuana concentrates in residential homes is another public safety concern related to legalization.⁵¹ Growing large numbers of marijuana plants has been associated with destruction of real estate through water and electrical damage, fires, and potential health risks from the growth of toxic mold. Amateurs experimenting in their homes with the THC extraction process to produce marijuana concentrates is leading to violent explosions, resulting in burns and other injuries. This process “can cause a fireball or flash fire that blows out windows and doors.”⁵²

Illustrating this public safety threat is the accompanying photo of a THC extraction laboratory explosion that occurred at an apartment complex in Bellevue, Washington in which hash oil was being manufactured. Multiple residents had to jump off balconies to escape the flames. One resident, an 87-year old woman, broke her pelvis while attempting to escape, and later died from complications.^{53,54}



What's the Rush?: Staying on Course is the Right Path for Texas

It is disconcerting that a rising number of states are contemplating the legalization of marijuana before more comprehensive statistical data is available on an issue of such significance. Time will ultimately provide additional clarity on this important topic, but until then, Texas would be doing a great injustice to its most vulnerable citizens by rushing into such a monumental decision when there is truly no immediate need for urgency, and, as highlighted in this document, a compelling number of reasons to be cautious and concerned. Before implementing a radical and potentially regrettable change that could have grave ramifications for the future, closely monitoring the impact of legalization in those states that have forged ahead in this uncharted territory is of paramount importance. By taking advantage of the opportunity to learn from these states that are serving as “experimental legalization laboratories” for our nation, voters can use this invaluable information to guide them in making sound and informed choices for Texas.

Information about the HIDTA Program

The HIDTA Program and the National Marijuana Initiative

The High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Program was created by Congress with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 to provide assistance to federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies operating in areas determined to be critical drug trafficking regions of the United States. There are currently 28 HIDTAs located in various regions across the United States.⁵⁵

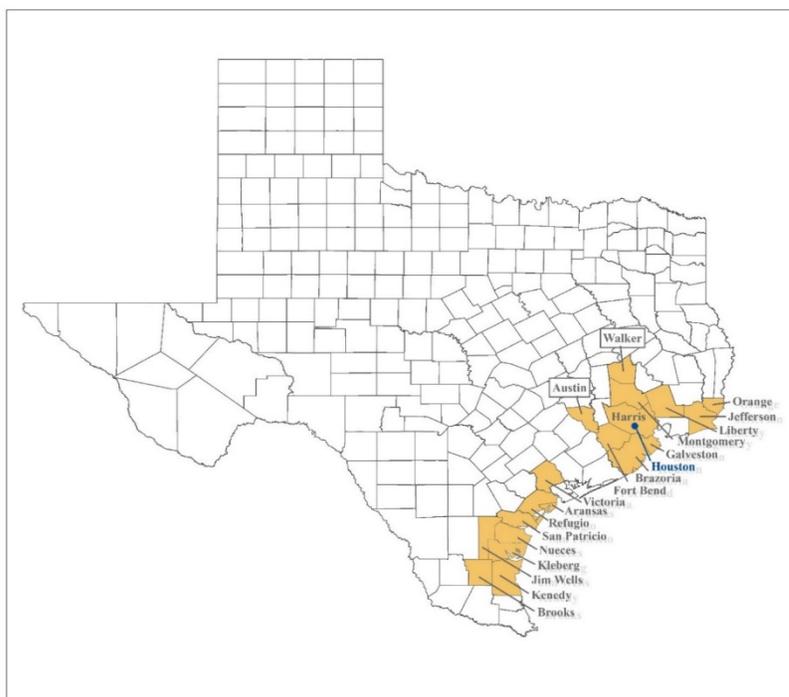
The HIDTA Program also supports several national initiatives, administered by the National HIDTA Assistance Center (NHAC). One of these Initiatives, pertinent to the topic of this report, is the National Marijuana Initiative (NMI). The NMI's purpose is to educate both the public and policy makers on issues surrounding marijuana. More information on the National Marijuana Initiative can be found on their website at <https://hidtanmi.org>. This site provides facts related to the impact of marijuana use and cultivation from professionals in a variety of fields such as scientists, medical staff, law enforcement, educators, and environmentalists.⁵⁶

The Houston HIDTA and the Houston Investigative Support Center

The Houston HIDTA was one of the original HIDTAs designated by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in 1991. As can be seen in the map below, the Houston HIDTA region encompasses 19 counties in South and Southeast Texas, most of which are located along the Gulf Coast.



The Houston HIDTA has established 13 different Initiatives to address various facets of the drug threats impacting this designated area of Texas. One of these Initiatives is the Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC). The HISC produces comprehensive threat assessments and other informative reports and bulletins on emerging drug-related trends and patterns of relevance to the Houston HIDTA. This report was produced by the HISC to provide timely and accurate information on the threat posed by marijuana legalization. Further information can be obtained by contacting the Intelligence Research Team (IRT) at 713-936-7424.



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