

When a Nation Goes to Pot

Marijuana has long been known as the “gateway” drug.

All she wanted was to be liked, to fit in. So Jackie Waller (not her real name) at age 10, pinched the marijuana joint being passed around the room and took a long, deep drag. Then she did as she was told. She held her breath.

“I’m mostly white and I lived in a black neighborhood,” she says. “I didn’t want to be different.”

And Waller didn’t stop with one tokes. At 16, she was snorting cocaine. At 19, as a mother of four, she switched from selling methamphetamine for dealers to cooking and selling her own.

Hooked on a \$120-a-day habit, she became a “meth head” and craved a perpetual high. Her life became a series of arrests, two-week stays in jail and releases—followed by periods when she’d mix, use, sell and land in jail again.

“I was hooked,” Waller says. “I couldn’t stop.”

Her story is a familiar one—retold again and again, from the streets of New York to the beaches of Hawaii. A kid, chasing fun and encouraged by a friend, smokes pot, gets high. For some, that’s where the spiral begins.

“It’s a trap,” Waller says. “People who say marijuana isn’t addictive just aren’t paying attention.”

Experts call marijuana a “gateway” drug, a door to further

illegal drug use.

Yet in the United States, where pills are cure-alls and the average age of first-time marijuana users has dropped from 19 to 13 in a generation, there is a growing movement to legalize marijuana. In neighboring Canada, possession of marijuana already is the equivalent of a traffic ticket. In the most recent U.S. Gallup poll on the subject, 34 percent of Americans favored legalizing marijuana.

It's the highest show of support since pollsters first asked the question in 1969. Support for legalizing has hovered around 25 percent for the last 20 years.

"As we look at what makes sense, legalization will continue to gain support," says Keith Stroup, director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

Slowly, as marijuana is gaining medicinal-drug status in individual states, Americans as a whole are reshaping their opinions of it. Many see it as less harmful than alcohol. At the same time, of the 4.5 million Americans with drug-dependency problems, 23 percent are teenagers—the highest percentage on record.

"We've never had a teen population with such a high rate of dependency before," says Jennifer DeVallance, spokeswoman for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Where the Hits Keep on Comin'

Ben Bly, 18, smoked marijuana for the first time at age 15.

"My friends were using it," he says. "I didn't want to at first. But I was curious. Just to see what it was like."

Overall, teen marijuana use has dipped slightly in the last year, but twice as many eighth-graders are trying pot today compared with a decade ago, according to the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse. The survey shows that nationwide the number of kids who try marijuana triples between seventh and ninth grade.

"There's no problem in picking up some marijuana," Bly says. "It's easy. I could call a couple guys I know right now and get some."

And it's not that expensive. For \$20 he can buy 20 sacks of marijuana, each containing two grams of pot—the equivalent of about 1.4 ounces.

Indications are that across the country the drug is readily available to youth. In Cincinnati, a survey of teens showed that 50 percent of them said pot is "easy" to get. In Ohio overall, 37 percent of high school seniors used pot in the last year.

Admission rates to Ohio treatment centers for marijuana addiction increased 220 percent from 1993 to 1999, according to a survey taken by the state of Ohio. Of the 11,650 teens in Ohio programs, 56 percent were being treated for marijuana addiction.

In Hawaii, 11 percent of students in grades six through 12 need treatment for substance abuse. The percentage is among the highest in the country.

Within a year, Bly was smoking joints before school and again at lunchtime in his white, upper-middle-class community of Olympia, Washington. "It's like you build up resistance," he says. "You need to smoke more to get the same high."

He ignored the risks of being caught. The odor, the red eyes—he didn't care, he says. Eventually he failed a drug test during probation (he had been picked up for drinking while driving) and landed in a drug-treatment program.

"But it's not like I'm addicted or anything," he adds.

At a high school across town from Bly's, English teacher Jeff Reagan says, "There is hardly a day that goes by that I don't smell marijuana in the hallways."

Eight arrests for marijuana possession were made last year at the high school where Reagan teaches. A few miles away in Tenino, a small logging town far removed from urban centers most people associate with drug problems, four students were kicked off the high school basketball team for smoking pot on the team bus while returning from a game.

Next Stop, Hillbilly Heroin?

When considering the profile of a teen drug abuser, no dominant characteristic emerges. Police say they've seen every variety of user—from the starting point-guard to the debate-team member to the flunking student. Students in rural areas are as likely as their urban counterparts to be involved with drugs, according to a recent study by Monitoring the Future, a survey taken recently by The National Institute on Drug Abuse.

In the tiny town of Hazard, Kentucky, almost everyone has a tragic story about “hillbilly heroin”—the prescription painkiller OxyContin. Newsweek magazine reported how the drug gripped this community of 4,800 people, causing the city park to become known as Pillville. Police arrested almost 200 dealers in 2001.

Paul Hamon, an Assemblies of God pastor in Hazard, told Newsweek: “I’m not saying we don’t have a drug problem, but it’s no worse than Louisville or New York City.”

His point is that the drug abuse in Hazard doesn’t seem much different from the drug abuse in other communities—such as Cadillac, Michigan, where seven junior high school students recently pleaded guilty to selling OxyContin.

Although alcohol remains the primary drug of choice among teenagers across the country, marijuana is firmly planted at No. 2.

“Around here, there is no question that smoking dope is on the rise,” says Jim Grosso, a high school counselor in Olympia, Washington, who went to college in California in the 1960s, when illegal drug experimentation skyrocketed in America.

“I don’t know for sure whether as many are smoking marijuana as when I went to college. I couldn’t say. I’m in an office, not at parties. But the stuff sold on the streets today is much more potent,” Grosso says.

It’s actually more than twice as potent as the marijuana of

the 1970s, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Drug seizures monitored by the DEA show that levels of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC—the hallucinogenic resin that supplies the high— have risen from approximately 2 percent in the 1970s to 5 percent in 2001. Because of the increased potency, today's drug remains in a person's system about seven days, not a day or two like the weed of 30 or so years ago.

Marijuana might even be the nation's largest cash crop, surpassing corn, wheat and maize, which produce about \$19 billion in revenue. In 2001, 724,000 people were arrested for marijuana violations, and 50,000 of them were sentenced to prison.

Also Potent—Legalization

Because of already crowded prison conditions, voters or legislators in many states are looking at reducing the charges for possession of marijuana. In Washington state, citizens voted to pass an initiative to make possession of marijuana the lowest enforcement priority—below public drunkenness, petty theft, and traffic or public-nuisance violations. Groups that endorsed the initiative included the King County Bar Association, the League of Women Voters and the King County Democrats.

Legalization of marijuana has been a platform issue for Democrats in King County for years.

"I'll be honest with you, I smoked a lot of pot in college and after college and had no problem kicking it," says King County Democrats Chairman Greg Rodriguez. "Look at the presidential

ances. Drugs can't even be used as an issue because they all did it."

Steven Sherman's response is Just Pray No, an organization he founded that aims to unite Christians in prayer for drug addicts and their families. Every April for the last 13 years Sherman has called for Christians worldwide to pray and fast.

"We are seeking 1 million prayer warriors from around the world to join us in the battle," he says.

Canada, with government-sponsored needle exchanges and legal injection sites for addicts, is on the opposite side of the United States in the so-called war on drugs. The war is not being waged in Vancouver, British Columbia, for example, where addicts in the city's freewheeling eastside slum shoot up with heroin bought from the city government.

What Canadian advocates call "progressive" the Bush administration calls "immoral." Washington has warned of tighter security at borders if marijuana is decriminalized in Canada. "B.C. Bud," as marijuana grown locally in Vancouver is known, is so potent and valuable it's traded with U.S. smugglers kilo-for-kilo for cocaine.

As the age of first-time marijuana users goes down, the number of advocates for legalization goes up.

Last spring an estimated 80,000 people attended Hempfest, a weekend festival in Seattle aimed at changing the country's marijuana laws. Though the Seattle police were out in force, there were no shortages of joints, pipes or puffs of marijuana smoke. In September 70,000 people similarly attended the

Boston Freedom Rally to protest marijuana laws.

“The way we’re going, I think marijuana will one day be legal in this country,” says Waller, today the development coordinator for the Seattle Metro Women’s Teen Challenge. “Marijuana is like smoking a cigarette to the majority of drug users.”

The social norm creeping into society is that pot is harmless.

“I can tell you that’s a lie,” Waller says. When she cooked and sold methamphetamine, she also worked as an interviewer for a drug-screening agency that dealt with job applicants. She even sold meth to co-workers.

“It was crazy,” she says.

Waller’s recovery from drug addiction began in a jail.

“I found my way to a chapel, and I dropped to my knees and asked Jesus to be the leader of my life,” she says. “I gave Him my empty heart.”

Parenting Before Educating

For years, education has been used to curtail drug use. But the lessons taught by public school . (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) officers actually made some students more curious about drugs.