

Legal Pot: Marijuana-Friendly Laws Threat to Kids?

The legalization of marijuana in Colorado and Washington has led the two states to become the epicenter of a national movement to legalize the drug. It has also heightened concerns about the effect on young people.

In both states, the legal age to possess marijuana is now 21 years old but many believe that those under 21 will be able to access it more easily.

That's a concern health-wise because pot poses a far greater threat to teens.

Dr. Christian Thurstone is the medical director of one of Colorado's largest clinics for treating youth with substance abuse issues. He's seen first-hand what the research shows—that 1 in 6 kids who try marijuana before the age of 18 become addicted.

"Some people think that marijuana is psychologically addictive, not physically addictive—it's just a soft drug," he told CBN News.

"But I can tell from personal experience that these kids who come to see us are dropping out of life. They are dropping out of school, they're dropping out of their families, their friends—all their activities," he said.

Pot and Brain Development

Research also shows that lots of kids are trying the drug. A 2010 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration study found two-thirds of new marijuana users are under 18. Unfortunately, marijuana impacts their developing brains in a much more powerful way than adults.

“It’s a time of enormous brain development,” Thurstone explained. “The very receptor that marijuana binds to in the brain is the receptor that helps control this brain development.”

A study published by the National Academy of Sciences reports that young people who start using marijuana regularly before age 18 can lose up to eight IQ points. A study published in last year’s *British Medical Journal* found marijuana use doubles the risk of car crashes.

Colorado educators also point to a possible link between the 2009 legalization of so-called medical marijuana and increased trouble in school.

When medical marijuana dispensaries began popping up across the state, drug-related school suspensions and expulsions spiked.

But Mason Tvert, communications director for the Marijuana Policy Project (MPP), which supports legalization, said student use has gone down in Colorado since 2009. He believes that regulation is the best way to protect kids.

“Illegal drug dealers are not asking for proof of age,” he explained. “By taking it, having it behind the counter, having really strict rules on selling to minors we can better keep it out of their hands.”

MPP helped to fund and organize the Colorado and Washington legalization campaigns. It’s now targeting 14 other states to advance marijuana-friendly laws.

Smart Approach to Pot

However, a new national organization is hoping to put the brakes on that effort.

Dr. Kevin Sabet is a former senior adviser at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy during both the Bush

and Obama administrations. He's now spearheading Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM) with Thurstone and former congressman and mental health advocate Patrick Kennedy.

In a recent interview with CBN News, Sabet said the country needs to reform its current policy on drugs and move beyond both the so-called drug wars and the polarizing debate over legalization.

Like legalization supporters, Sabet agrees that the United States is far too quick to criminalize marijuana users. But he's also not convinced that legalization is the solution.

"The problem with it is that it increases the permissiveness of the drug and it increases social acceptance," he explained. "Why introduce another legal substance when we're already having a hard time with our currently legal ones?"

SAM hopes to promote marijuana research to obtain FDA-approved, pharmacy-dispensed cannabis-based medications. It wants to prevent "Big Tobacco" companies from targeting marijuana to kids the way they have marketed cigarettes to youth.

Educating Kids

SAM also hopes to educate the public and specifically, kids. CBN News recently spoke with kids at several Colorado high schools who all downplayed any physical harm associated with marijuana use.

"It's a plant," one kid reasoned. "You smoke it and it just gets you high. It doesn't kill you or anything."

Sabet said he believes that medical marijuana has led to such thinking.

"One of the reasons that kids think it's okay is that so-called medical marijuana has softened attitudes and people

think it's a medicine, 'It comes from the earth-how bad can it be?'" he said.

Thurstone noted that much of the research on marijuana has been published more recently and hasn't reached the public.

"There's a lag time between getting it out in the scientific journals and getting it out in the real world," he said.

In the meantime, churches in Colorado and other organizations that work with youth must determine how to talk with them about marijuana and all the changes.

"Anytime a drug becomes more readily available we need to talk about it and prepare parents to have conversations with their kids," Brady Boyd, senior pastor at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, said.

Getting at the Root Issues

Boyd said believers are concerned about how legalization will play out, but at the same time he doesn't want them to miss the deeper issue.

"So we're talking internally about why are people so willing to medicate themselves," he said. "What pain are they running from? What issues are they struggling with that causes them to go to things like marijuana?"

No one knows just how Colorado will shape its regulations or how available marijuana will become.

What's clear is this: the nation will be watching, waiting to see what legalization means for communities and especially for their youth.