



## Legalizing Marijuana Not Worth the Costs

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### Commentary & Analysis



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With the United States still struggling through the recession, state governments are exploring convenient fixes for overcoming massive debts burdening their states.

After years of heavy spending, **California**, for example, is facing a \$42 billion deficit. To address this staggering shortfall, some legislators are proposing the legalization of marijuana to boost tax revenue.

Certainly some states are in dire economic straits; however, we cannot allow social and law enforcement policy to be determined simply by revenue needs. Put plainly, marijuana was made illegal because it is harmful; citing revenue gain as reason to legalize the drug emphasizes money over health and ignores the significant cost burdens that will inevitably arise as a result.

**"Even with the U.S. economy struggling, we should not buy into the argument that vices should be legalized, taxed and regulated—no matter how much revenue we think it may generate."**

As former head of the **U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration**, I am intimately familiar with the many challenges marijuana legalization poses, and from my experience, the best economic policy for dealing with marijuana is to discourage use by enforcement and education rather than legalization and **taxation**. Legalizing the drug will swell societal ills, and this outweighs the **monetary benefits** that might be achieved from its lawful sale.

This is not the first time legalization has come to the fore. In the 1970s, **Alaska** legalized the drug—only to recriminalize it in 1990 after Alaskan teen marijuana use jumped to twice the national average. This is clear evidence that if legalized, marijuana use will increase (even among children).

There are significant cost burdens that come along with increased marijuana use. For example, there will be a greater social cost from decline in **worker productivity** and school performance. Legalization will also lead to a greater

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need for drug education, rehabilitation and treatment. And there will be costs associated with selling the drug.

Do we really want our governments to sell substances known to be **toxic to the body**, and which has no medical value that is recognized by the medical community, for the sake of sheer profit? If this were a corporation proposing such a thing, it would be taken to court.

Consider these findings from a [white paper by the California Police Chiefs Association's Task Force on Marijuana Dispensaries](#): California legalized "medical" marijuana in 1996, and dispensaries where the drug is handed out – to pretty much whoever comes in with a doctor's note – have become catalysts for serious crime.

According to the white paper, dispensary operators have been attacked, robbed and murdered. Also, "drug dealing, sales to minors, loitering, heavy vehicle and foot traffic in retail areas, increased noise and robberies of customers just outside dispensaries" are all criminal byproducts resulting from California's **medical marijuana** distribution. We can expect similar problems—but on a far grander scale—from full legalization.

Given these cost burdens—not to mention health and societal burdens—we should continue to focus efforts to discourage drug use. We can do this in a variety of ways. On alcohol and cigarettes, we require warnings and education. With methamphetamine, cocaine and other harmful drugs, we prohibit and criminalize their sale and use. While marijuana may not be as harmful and addictive as methamphetamine, it is harmful nonetheless, and the best economic policy is to make its sale and use illegal.

The additional costs of drug education and rehabilitation combined with the increased social costs associated with increased marijuana use and sale are all greater than the potential revenue gained through legalization.

Even with the U.S. economy struggling, we should not buy into the argument that vices should be legalized, taxed and regulated—no matter how much revenue we think it may generate.

Some things just aren't worth the costs.

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A look at how marijuana figures into the history and culture of the nation.



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Pot use and laws vary widely from state to state. Here are some highlights.



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Marijuana users experience the drug in a variety of ways, and various products exist to facilitate consumption.



### A Gallery of Medical Marijuana

With medical use legal 14 states, there's quite an assortment of varieties available.