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Pot No Longer Focus of Anti-Drug Campaigns

CBS News Examination Finds Prescription Drugs Are Seen as Bigger Threat Than Marijuana by Government, Non-Profit Groups

By Elizabeth Sprague



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Recognize this image? Cali Carlin takes you on a walk down memory lane with a look at anti-drug PSAs through the years.



(CBS)

(CBS) *This story was written by **Elizabeth Sprague** as part of a new CBSNews.com special report on the evolving debate over marijuana legalization in the U.S. [Click here for more of the series, Marijuana Nation: The New War Over Weed.](#)*

Over the last several years, without many people realizing it, the U.S. government has changed the focus of its anti-drug efforts, deemphasizing marijuana in favor of prescription drugs.

A CBS News survey of government and nonprofit anti-drug groups has found a retreat from anti-marijuana campaigns over the past several years as prescription and over the counter drug abuse has grown amongst teens.

In fact, the Partnership for a Drug Free America, the nation's largest creator of anti-drug messages, hasn't produced a single anti-marijuana public service advertisement since 2005.

The change comes as a result of the decline in marijuana use amongst teens, and growing worry over the abuse of prescription drugs. Marijuana use has been declining for 10 years and past-month use is down 25 percent since 2001 according to the largest tracking study in the U.S., "Monitoring the Future" by the University of Michigan.

Meanwhile prescription drug abuse has held steady over the past five years according to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, with nearly one in five teens (19 percent) abusing prescription medications to get high.

"There is a new threat in town," Robert Dennisoton of the Office of National Drug Control Policy said.

The concern about pills has been highlighted by a string of high profile deaths like that of Heath Ledger, Anna Nicole Smith, and possibly Michael Jackson -- all tied to the abuse of legal prescription drugs.

In an effort to spread awareness about the dangers of the misuse of prescription drugs, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America even refers to young people today as "Generation Rx" in [TV advertisements](#) that point to the dangers of misuse of those drugs.

"For this generation, high prevalence of prescription drug abuse was kicking in... there was a dawning, and a number of us began to feel that we need to do something about it," said Sean Clark, executive vice president with the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy, the government's drug policy wing, now dedicates all of its campaign resources directed at parents - some \$14 million dollars since 2008 - to the abuse of prescription and over the counter drugs.

"The issue of prescription drug abuse, which the Office of National Drug Control Policy has been shouting about from the rooftops, it is a significant problem in this country," National Drug Control Policy Director [Gil Kerlikowske said on "The Early Show"](#) last week.

Advocates for marijuana legalization argue that the shift from anti-marijuana to anti-pill messages has come at least in large part because prescription and over the counter medicines are far more deadly than marijuana.

"While it is the most widely used illicit drug, it is much less dangerous than prescription drugs," said Bruce Mirken of the Marijuana Policy Project, a group that supports marijuana legalization.

"The government is talking about the dangers of acetaminophen - this stuff is given out like candy and can kill," he said. "When you put it in that context, marijuana almost looks benign."

The addictiveness of marijuana - or lack thereof - compared to other drugs is also cited by supporters.

"The bottom line is the Opiates and Stimulates are much more addictive than marijuana, those that try it

are likely to return to them after first use." said Mitch Earleywine, associate professor of psychology at the State University of New York. "Maybe 9 percent of marijuana users develop problems but 14-23 percent of prescription drug abusers end up saying can't quit or report withdrawal when they want to stop."

Advocates also point to recently-released data obtained by the Web site ProCon.org which indicates that prescription drugs are responsible for far more deaths than marijuana.

The [report](#) compared data on deaths due to marijuana with FDA-approved medications. It found that the approved drugs -- which included anti-psychotics, Attention Deficit Disorder medications, painkillers and other prescription drugs -- were suspected as the primary cause of 10,008 deaths and as a secondary cause in 1,679 more.

Marijuana, on the other hand, was the primary suspect in zero deaths and a suspected secondary factor in 279 deaths.

Another [report](#) recently issued by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement indicated that prescription drugs caused more deaths than illicit drugs - even including alcohol-related automobile accidents. Prescription drugs were the cause of more than 25 percent of drug related deaths in the state. Marijuana was not listed as a cause of death last year in Florida.

There are now more new abusers of prescription drugs each year than there are abusers of marijuana, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health from the Department of Health and Human Services. About 2.15 million people started using prescription pain relievers to get high in 2007, while 2.09 million people started using marijuana that year.