

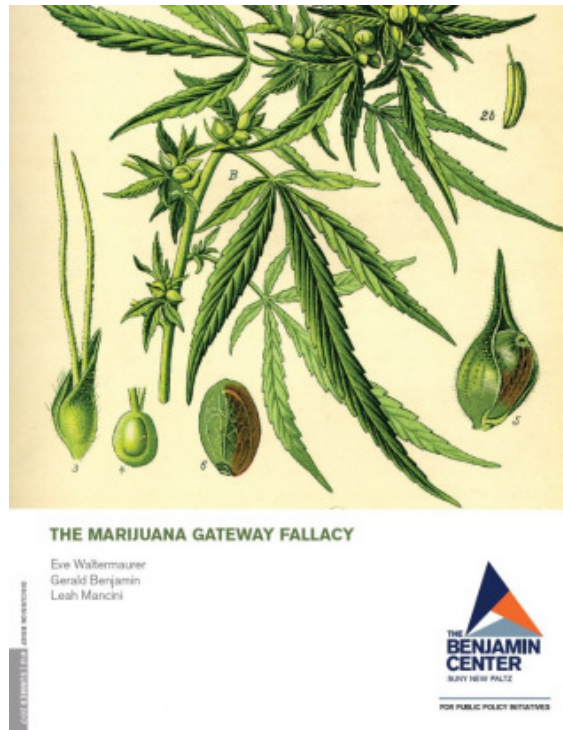
Marijuana Law, Policy & Reform

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Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives takes on “The Marijuana Gateway Fallacy”

By Douglas A. Berman

Earlier this week, the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz released this notable discussion brief titled, “The Marijuana Gateway Fallacy.” This short report covers a lot of marijuana reform ground outside the arena of “gateway drug” discourse, but here is one passage from the report on that front highlighting that we still hear “gateway” talk from politicians on both sides of the political aisle:



There are alternative explanations to the gateway hypothesis for why most users of dangerous drugs report the use of marijuana. The Common Liability Model posits that the use of multiple drugs reflects a common risk for drug use, rather than the use of one drug increasing the risk of using other. This may arise from common genetic predispositions, psychosocial factors, drug availability, and opportunity to use. Availability is linked to the age of an individual. Because of the relative ease of obtaining alcohol and marijuana in the home (compared with cocaine and heroin), youth interested in drug experimentation are likely to try these first.

In 2016, the National Institute on Drug Addiction (NIDA) — while not fully rejecting the idea that marijuana is a gateway drug—concluded that, given the evidence to date, “further research is needed to explore this question.”

Shortly after NIDA released this determination, D.A.R.E. quietly removed marijuana from its publicized list of gateway drugs.

Yet, non-evidence-based political factors on both the left and the right remain the reason for the persistence of the gateway myth. In 2015, Chris Christie, New Jersey Governor and former Republican presidential candidate is quoted as saying, “Marijuana is a gateway drug. We have an enormous addiction problem in this country, and we need to send very clear leadership from the White House on down through the federal law enforcement.”

In Massachusetts, Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh and House Speaker Robert DeLeo, both Democrats, and Republican Governor Charlie Baker formed a coalition opposing legalization of recreational marijuana. Mayor Walsh said “You’ll hear the other side say that marijuana is not a gateway drug. If you know anyone in the recovery community, talk to them... You’ll hear that most of them, many of them started with marijuana.” Speaker DeLeo added that it would be hypocritical to support legalization of marijuana while fighting the opioid abuse epidemic.

When talking about legalization of the medical use of marijuana in Florida, her state, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, former chair of the Democratic National Committee, said about marijuana policy: “I just don’t think we should legalize more mind altering substances if we want to make it less likely that people travel down the path toward using drugs.”

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