

Viewpoint: Let facts, not fears, drive the marijuana decision

By Eve Walter

It caused well over 30,000 deaths in 2017 related to mental/behavioral harm, dependence, accidental poisoning, and chronic illness. In 2018, 17,245 drivers in Colorado were confirmed to be under its influence, with a quarter of these cases resulting in an accident. It has been empirically associated with increased mental health problems, suicide, homicide, and psychotic episodes. To make matters worse, individuals are known to store over 20 pounds in their homes for recreational use, unprotected from access by children.

Marijuana? No. Alcohol, legal in the U.S. since 1933.

A recent New York Times article reported that both New York and New Jersey are on the fence regarding legalizing marijuana's recreational use. Lawmakers are expressing fears of impaired drivers and of marijuana being a "menace to public health." This has been found to be true for alcohol, but never for marijuana.

The U.S. Department of Transportation accepts that the research on impaired driving associated with marijuana is highly limited. There are several reasons. Unlike alcohol, the THC from marijuana remains in a person's system far longer than the impact of the drug, so its presence does not presumptively provide evidence of causation. In a study of its effects, it was found that individuals under the influence of marijuana, unlike alcohol, are aware of their impairment, exhibit greater caution, and drive more slowly. Current studies citing increased rates of vehicular accidents "caused" by marijuana legalization are limited to broad associations comparing automobile accident rates of states that have legalized to those that have not, and even these show conflicting findings.

In fact, there are fewer than a handful of deaths attributed to marijuana each year despite one in seven people reporting use.

In the same New York Times article, Christopher Bateman, a Republican New Jersey state senator who opposed expunging criminal records for convictions of possession of up to five pounds of marijuana, argued that this was not evidence of "you and I smoking a little bit. That's a dealer on the corner, selling and distributing." How much alcohol is in the senator's liquor cabinet? Should we assume he is dealing as well, without a license?

I am not advocating to make alcohol illegal or to change the names of bars and liquor stores to Drug Dealerships. I am advocating that we use real data to make good decisions. We have evidence that marijuana is less harmful than alcohol and tobacco. We have evidence that marijuana is not a gateway drug. We need to focus on the real substance abuse epidemic and remedy the effects of past mistakes. We need our legislators to stop using fear-based, rather than fact-based, arguments to stifle important legislation. We need to move away from racial disparities in arrests and concentrate on really attacking the causes and effects of our opioid epidemic. Now.

Eve Walter is a senior research scientist at The Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz.