

# Historic Move: Maryland to Pardon 2.5 Million Cannabis Convictions

## Major Step in Criminal Justice Reform

Maryland has made a significant move in criminal justice reform by announcing mass pardons for individuals convicted of marijuana-related offenses. Governor Wes Moore's new initiative will pardon over 175,000 individuals convicted of possessing cannabis or related paraphernalia. Although these pardons will not erase criminal records permanently, they mark a substantial step in addressing the repercussions of the long-standing war on drugs in the United States.

## Comparative Progress in Marijuana Conviction Remedies

According to NORML, a pro-marijuana legalization group, about 2.5 million expungements and pardons for cannabis convictions have been issued across the country in recent years. However, Paul Armentano, deputy director of NORML, emphasized that this number is relatively small considering that over 30 million Americans have been arrested for marijuana offenses over the last five decades.

## The Difference Between Pardons and Expungements

While pardons forgive individuals for their offenses and can restore certain civil liberties like voting and serving on juries, expungements go further by completely hiding the conviction record. This can significantly ease the path to federal college tuition assistance, qualification for public housing, and participation in children's school activities. Typically, pardons can be issued unilaterally by executive officials, while expungements usually require a legal process.

## State and Federal Movements

Several states including Massachusetts, Nevada, and Oregon, as well as cities like Birmingham, Alabama, and Kansas City, Missouri, have implemented broad pardon initiatives similar to Maryland's. On the federal level, President Joe Biden has issued pardons for those convicted of possession on federal lands or in Washington D.C., though the exact number of people affected remains unclear.

## Marijuana Legalization and Criminal Records

The movement to legalize marijuana, which began in the late 1990s, has seen significant progress with 24 states now allowing recreational use and 26 states decriminalizing it. These changes often come with provisions for clearing past convictions, as seen in Maryland's 2022 ballot measure which legalized marijuana and included an expungement-by-application provision.

## Addressing Racial Disparities

The Maryland policy aims to address the racial disparities evident in the enforcement of drug laws. Data from the ACLU shows that Black individuals are more than three times as likely to be charged with marijuana possession as their white counterparts. Maryland's mass pardon approach seeks to eliminate further disparities by automatically covering all qualifying individuals.

### **Advocacy and Future Outlook**

Advocates for drug policy reform, such as Adrian Rocha from the Last Prisoner Project and Cat Packer from the Drug Policy Alliance, highlight the importance of broad, automatic expungement and pardon policies. Such measures are crucial for rectifying the long-term impacts of marijuana criminalization on Black and brown communities and are seen as essential steps towards fairer drug policies and criminal justice reform.

As Maryland implements these mass pardons, the state sets a precedent for others to follow, providing a model of how to rectify past injustices associated with marijuana convictions and move towards a more equitable legal landscape.

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