

# Debunking 3 Common Myths About Cannabis Decriminalization

## Charleston Considers Decriminalizing Cannabis Amid Growing Debate and Public Support

In Charleston, West Virginia, a significant debate is unfolding over the decriminalization of cannabis. The city council is set to decide whether to place the issue on the ballot this November or to adopt the ordinance directly, following strong public support for the measure. This debate comes amid increasing concerns about public safety and social justice, particularly in light of a growing trend where more people are using cannabis daily than alcohol, raising concerns about impaired driving and road safety.

### Public Push for Decriminalization

The push for decriminalization in Charleston has gained considerable momentum. The Sensible Marijuana Ordinance, or Bill No. 8043, was brought into the spotlight after a successful petition led by local advocacy groups, including Mano Amiga Responsible Implementation (MARI) and Ground Game Texas. The petition gathered over 900 signatures from city residents, prompting the city council to consider the measure.

On July 15, the city's Ordinance and Rulemaking Committee met to discuss the ordinance, which proposes reducing penalties for simple possession of cannabis within city limits. The measure aims to eliminate jail time, court fees, and fines for individuals caught with small amounts of cannabis, a move intended to prevent unnecessary arrests and the associated negative consequences.

"This campaign is about ending needless cannabis arrests, protecting our community, and demonstrating the power we hold together," said Elle Cross, MARI's campaign director.

### Understanding Decriminalization vs. Legalization

It is crucial to differentiate between decriminalization and legalization. Under decriminalization, cannabis remains illegal under state law, but local authorities in Charleston would not prosecute individuals for simple possession intended for personal use. This differs from legalization, where the sale and use of cannabis are permitted under regulated conditions.

The Sensible Marijuana Ordinance, modeled after similar legislation in other cities and states, seeks to reduce the legal consequences of cannabis possession. This approach has been upheld against constitutional challenges in other jurisdictions, suggesting a robust legal framework for the proposed changes.

### The Broader Context: Cannabis Laws in the United States

Currently, marijuana is legal for recreational use in 24 states and the District of Columbia, including three of West Virginia's neighboring states—Maryland, Ohio, and Virginia. With a significant portion of West

Virginia's borders touching states where cannabis is legalized, the contrast between state and local laws becomes evident, raising questions about the fairness and efficacy of strict penalties for cannabis possession in Charleston.

Nationally, the enforcement of cannabis laws has been costly, both in financial terms and in social impact. In 2010, West Virginia alone spent about \$17 million enforcing possession laws, funds that advocates argue could be better allocated to community services such as public housing, utility assistance, and renewable energy projects.

## **Public Health and Safety Considerations**

One of the arguments against the decriminalization of cannabis is the potential impact on public health and safety. However, research consistently shows that marijuana is not as dangerous as often portrayed. Unlike alcohol, marijuana use has not been linked to overdose deaths, long-term health issues, violent crime, or serious injuries.

The current enforcement of cannabis possession laws in West Virginia also highlights significant racial disparities. Black West Virginians are 7.3 times more likely to be arrested for cannabis possession than their white counterparts, despite similar usage rates. In Charleston, this disparity is even more pronounced, with Black residents constituting a disproportionate percentage of arrests for simple possession.

Decriminalization could alleviate these disparities by reducing the number of individuals swept into the criminal justice system for minor offenses. It would also allow law enforcement to redirect resources towards addressing more serious crimes, enhancing overall public safety.

## **Dispelling Myths: Cannabis as a Gateway Drug**

A common argument against cannabis decriminalization is the "gateway drug" theory, which suggests that marijuana use leads to the use of more dangerous substances. However, recent studies, including those published in the American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse and JAMA Pediatrics, have debunked this myth. These studies indicate no increase in illicit drug use among teenagers in states with legal cannabis and even show a reduction in alcohol-related problems.

Further, a 2023 study in Psychological Medicine found no significant changes in illicit drug use following the legalization of marijuana, reinforcing the argument that the stigma surrounding cannabis, rather than scientific evidence, often drives policy decisions.

## **A Call for Sensible Reform**

As Charleston's city council prepares to make a decision, the Sensible Marijuana Ordinance presents an opportunity to align local policy with public sentiment and broader national trends. The proposed decriminalization measure is seen as a step towards reducing unnecessary arrests, addressing social justice issues, and reallocating public resources more effectively.

The upcoming decision will not only impact Charleston but also set a precedent for other cities in West Virginia and beyond. By adopting the ordinance, Charleston could signal a shift towards more progressive and equitable drug policies, reflecting the evolving attitudes towards cannabis in the United States.

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