



Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area
300 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1300
Seattle, WA 98104
(206) 352-3600 fax (206) 352-3699

Dave Rodriguez, Director

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Contact: Steve Freng, Prevention and Treatment
Manager, (206) 352-3603 or sfreng@nw.hidta.org

Marijuana legalization has consequences, new Washington-focused study finds

Adults in Washington state rank among the highest users of marijuana in the nation, pot is disrupting the classroom and cannabis grown in The Evergreen State is being illegally exported across America, concludes a new report that examines the impacts of the drug since voters legalized it for recreational use in 2012.

The 142-page report, produced by a federally funded office in Seattle that works closely with law enforcement on drug trafficking issues, draws information from 37 public entities to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the impacts of Initiative 502. It covers the history of marijuana in Washington since voters approved it for medical use in 1998 and reviews key state laws, regulations and rulings over those 18 years.

The nearly 30 million grams of marijuana legally harvested since legalization “would be the equivalent of providing one ounce to each person in attendance at over 14 full-capacity events at Century Link Field,” the report states. A study by the Association of Washington Cities concludes that 90 percent of the state’s population lives within 10 miles of a marijuana retail store.

A section on youth impacts indicates 98 percent of student drug violations in Seattle Public Schools between September, 2013 and May of 2014 were due to marijuana. From September 2014 to January 2015, 77 percent of all alcohol and drug violations in Seattle schools were related to marijuana. In 2014, youth under the age of 20 made up 45 percent of Washington Poison Center calls. The number of those calls has since increased to 80 percent since legalization.

The *Washington State Marijuana Impact Report* was prepared by the Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (NW HIDTA) a Seattle-based office administered by the National Office of Drug Control Policy. Besides law enforcement, NW HIDTA provides assistance to the state’s substance abuse prevention community, drug courts, tribes and other organizations in areas that are known for the movement of drugs and other illicit substances.

The report indicates that even with the legalization of recreational marijuana the black market is still thriving in the state, fueled in part by the medical marijuana industry that has gone largely unregulated and continuing market demand beyond what is sold in legal retail stores. The recreational and medical markets are slated to merge in July due to legislation passed in 2015.

Among other key findings:

- Marijuana is big business in Washington. Between June 2014 and the end of July 2015, the state generated nearly \$308 million in sales. This includes all sales from producers, processors, and retailers. Retail sales now surpass \$2 million per day, according to the Washington Liquor and Cannabis Board.
- Since legalization in 2012, Washington grown marijuana was destined for 43 states across the United States, despite measures in the initiative that aimed at stopping it at state lines. Marijuana is also moving through the mail. Since 2012, 320 pounds of Washington origin marijuana was seized via parcel detection.

(More)

- Seventeen THC extraction lab explosions occurred in Washington in 2014. THC is the component of marijuana that produces the “high,” and is used to make products like high-THC concentrates and oils. Extraction processes typically include the use of highly flammable butane gas, which can be ignited by static electricity from clothing or even a refrigerator cycling.
- The incidents of marijuana-impaired driving are increasing. Drivers with active THC in their blood who were in a fatal driving accident have risen 122 percent from 2010 (16) to 2014 (23) according to the Washington State Traffic Safety Commission.
- According to a national survey that studies past-month marijuana use, Washington State young adults (between 18 and 25) and use by adults older than 26 was an overall 5 percent higher than the national average in 2012-2013.
- 32,059 grams of illegally possessed marijuana were seized during the first nine months of 2015 off highways and interstates across Washington.
- Data provided by the Spokane Valley and Seattle police departments shows strong relationships between crime and marijuana use, with a stark rise in marijuana related incidents following legalization.
- Cookies and desserts comprise nearly 70 percent of the state approved marijuana-infused products in most stores.
- Calls related to marijuana edibles and other products infused with marijuana have taken a big leap at the Washington Poison Center since legalization, especially related to youth. The center has logged 312 percent more calls related to infused products, and calls related to marijuana oil jumped 350 percent over three years. A report published by the center in 2014 states that children under the age of 18 account for 50 percent of their intoxication calls related to chocolate and candy, with 25 percent of the reports related to goods baked with marijuana.
- Legal marijuana production is balanced about equally between counties in western Washington and eastern Washington, although the number of retail stores in western Washington far exceeds stores east of the Cascades. The counties with the highest total number of licenses issued (including producer, processor and retailer) are King, Snohomish, Spokane and Okanogan, with Spokane County the highest at 189 of which 97 are licensed growers. Okanogan has the second highest number of licensed growers at 42.

“Data compiled in this report shows that the decision to legalize marijuana was not without harm,” said Dave Rodriguez, executive director of NW HIDTA. “Unfortunately, many of the reported outcomes show the exact opposite of the goals that sold the initiative to voters. We now see clearly that marijuana is increasingly hurting our youth, black market sales have not disappeared, the amount of crime due to marijuana has actually gone up and Washington has become a net exporter of cannabis to other states.”

The primary author of the report is Alison Wassall, a project research analyst employed by NW HIDTA to document the impacts and consequences of the legalization of recreational marijuana. Ms. Wassall received bachelor’s degrees in law and justice as well as psychology from Central Washington University and a master’s in criminal justice from Seattle University. She completed internships with Puyallup Police Department and the U.S. Coast Guard Investigative Service.

The full report can be downloaded at <http://mfiles.org>.