



Position on the Legalization of Adult Use Cannabis

Compass Mark is a non-profit organization founded in 1966 with a mission to prevent addiction through education, skill-building and community mobilization. Each year, Compass Mark's science-based addiction prevention programs serve over 8,000 children, youth and adults across South Central Pennsylvania.

As a leading prevention agency in our Commonwealth, Compass Mark has a significant interest in current public policy discussions concerning the legalization of adult use cannabis. We firmly believe that any changes to policy or law must be based on research and evidence, rather than public opinion polls or fiscal pressures. In addition, we contend that substance use prevention and treatment providers must be key stakeholders involved in these discussions and the formulation of our Commonwealth's public health policy.

For the purposes of this paper, Compass Mark utilizes the term "cannabis" as a comprehensive descriptor that encompasses marijuana products and other related substances. This terminology reflects the diverse array of products derived from the cannabis plant, which are utilized for a variety of medicinal and recreational applications.

Compass Mark is universally opposed to the legalization of adult use cannabis in Pennsylvania. We offer the following points to support this position:

- 1) **Cannabis legalization will have significant, long-term negative impacts on our youth.** In 2022, over 44% of marijuana users between the ages of 12 and 17 met the criteria for a cannabis use disorder.ⁱ In states that have legalized adult use cannabis, the progression is even more accelerated. Youth ages 12 – 17 in legalized states experienced a 25% increase in cannabis use disorder compared to non-legal states.ⁱⁱ Due to the dangerous effects of cannabis on the developing brain, youth cannabis use also frequently leads to other forms of substance misuse and addiction. For example, adolescent cannabis users are 2.5 times more likely to abuse prescription opioids.ⁱⁱⁱ Following cannabis legalization in California, the state's 2020 Monitoring the Future survey indicated the largest single-year increase in adolescent marijuana vaping ever recorded in the survey's 45-year history.
- 2) **There is a direct connection between cannabis use and an array of mental health concerns.** Research indicates that there is a significant correlation between cannabis use and psychosis^{iv}, anxiety disorders,^v and suicide.^{vi} Additionally, frequent users of high-potency cannabis products are at higher risk for mental health disorders like schizophrenia, lifetime depression, and anxiety.^{vii} Unfortunately, these same mental health concerns are increasing dramatically among young people, and cannabis is being used to self-medicate, perpetuating a vicious cycle of dependency.
- 3) **The potency of cannabis products on the market is higher than ever before.** Marijuana in the 1970's had an average of 2% THC (the psychoactive component), while average potency today ranges from 18-35% and can be sold as high as 99%.^{viii} These high-potency products are more

addictive and result in worse health outcomes for users, especially teens and young adults. Moreover, the emergence of high-potency edible cannabis products present new safety-related concerns including overconsumption, inconsistent labeling, and accidental ingestion of products that may appeal to children.^{ix}

4) **Legalization will not eliminate the illicit cannabis market or solve broader social justice concerns.** In California, recent estimates are that 70-80% of cannabis sold in legal dispensaries was produced and grown illegally. Data also shows that the number of cannabis seizures is greater in states that allow for medical and recreational cannabis as opposed to states that criminalize cannabis.^x Minority communities have long suffered under our country's antiquated marijuana policies and misguided emphasis on criminalization. However, cannabis legalization is not the solution. Crime data in states that have legalized cannabis demonstrate that minority communities continue to be disproportionately affected in terms of arrests, justice system involvement, negative social and emotional consequences, and public health impacts.^{xi} Reform of cannabis policy is long overdue but must be approached through the lens of public health rather than criminal justice.

5) **Impaired driving and road safety concerns will increase with cannabis legalization.** Substantial evidence has shown a statistical association between cannabis use and an increased risk of motor vehicle crashes.^{xii} A national study examined impaired driving and found that risky driving behaviors were higher in states that legalized cannabis than in states that did not legalize cannabis.^{xiii} In Colorado, the first state to legalize adult use, cannabis is now implicated in 25% of all road deaths.

Based upon the above, Compass Mark is fully opposed to the legalization of adult use cannabis and the creation of a new industry for the distribution and sale of cannabis products in Pennsylvania.

We join alongside many other notable organizations that are opposed to legalization. These include:

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Academy of Family Physicians
- American Automotive Association
- American Medical Association
- American Psychiatric Association
- American Society for Addiction Medicine
- Association for Addiction Professionals
- Caron Treatment Centers
- Commonwealth Prevention Alliance
- Pennsylvania Association of County Drug & Alcohol Administrators
- Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association
- Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association
- Pennsylvania Fraternal Order of Police
- Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association

Recommendations

If the Commonwealth proceeds with legislation to legalize this product, we recommend that certain considerations be made to protect vulnerable populations and reduce the associated harms and consequences to our health. These include:

- *Provide targeted funding to reduce harms associated with cannabis use and address the corresponding need for increased mental health and substance use treatment.* A recent study found that in states that have legalized, substance use disorders, chronic homelessness, and arrests increased by 17, 35 and 13 percent, respectively.^{xiv} Any state revenues associated with legalization must be specifically directed to address the corresponding costs.
- *Invest in diversionary programs for specific levels of cannabis-related offenses.* Through utilizing early intervention strategies, diversion programs can effectively decrease costs to the criminal justice system and the local community.^{xv}
- *Require local jurisdictions to “opt-in” to cannabis retail sales in their community.* Exposure to the cannabis retail environment at an early age is directly correlated with adolescent cannabis use. A recent study confirmed that youth cannabis use was more common among students whose schools were within a mile of a cannabis retailer.^{xvi} Local communities deserve the opportunity to decide whether they want this product sold in their locality, and must be able to create more stringent requirements than state law if they so choose.
- *Launch a science-based public education campaign in concert with the implementation of any cannabis policy reform.* Correcting misinformation is critical to educating our youth since misconceptions about cannabis among adolescents are strongly correlated with use. The public must be apprised of the potential risks and adverse consequences of cannabis use, so they can make informed decisions regarding their use of the drug.
- *Ensure that a portion of cannabis tax revenue is directed toward further research on the physiological and societal impacts of cannabis use.* Specific areas where further study is needed include the impact of THC on the developing brain, the efficacy of cannabis for the treatment of certain medical conditions, impairment and road safety, and effective treatment modalities for cannabis-induced psychosis and other mental health conditions related to cannabis use.

Compass Mark recognizes the diverse perspectives that exist throughout our country on topics of cannabis use and public policy. As a matter of public health, we call for cannabis policy decisions to be made based on research and a thoughtful examination of the evidence from other jurisdictions. These decisions are too important to be rushed or driven solely by budget constraints but rather must be led by knowledgeable public health experts. We welcome the opportunity for further dialogue as we work together to build a safe and healthy community for us and future generations. For more information or resources from Compass Mark, please visit www.compassmark.org.

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- ^x Worrall, J. L., Han, S., & Mannumood, M. S. (2022). Marijuana Legalization and U.S. Postal Inspection Service Seizures: An exploration of black market activity. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(4), 617–636. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-022-09696-3>
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