MARIJUANA DECRIMINALIZATION TALKING POINTS

TALKING POINT #1: Decriminalizing marijuana frees up police resources to deal with more serious crimes.

60,000 individuals are behind bars for marijuana offenses at a cost to taxpayers of $1.2 billion per year.

Taxpayers annually spend between $7.5 billion and $10 billion arresting and prosecuting individuals for marijuana violations. Almost 90 percent of these arrests are for marijuana possession only.

The state of California saved nearly $1 billion dollars from 1976 to 1985 by decriminalizing the personal possession of one ounce of marijuana, according to a study of the state justice department budget.

New Mexico's 2001 state-commissioned Drug Policy Advisory Group determined that marijuana decriminalization "will result in greater availability of resources to respond to more serious crimes without any increased risks to public safety."

Marijuana arrests have more than doubled since 1991, while adult use of the drug has remained stable. During this same period, the number of arrests for cocaine and heroin fell by approximately 33 percent.
Police arrest more Americans per year on marijuana charges than the total number of arrestees for all violent crimes combined, including murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault.


Marijuana violations constitute the fifth most common criminal offense in the United States.


More than 734,000 individuals were arrested on marijuana charges in 2000. Eighty-eight percent of those arrested were charged with marijuana possession only.


Almost 5 million Americans have been arrested for marijuana since 1992. That's more than the entire populations of Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington DC and Wyoming combined.


**TALKING POINT #2: Far more harm is caused by the criminal prohibition of marijuana than by the use of marijuana itself.**

According to editors of the prestigious Lancet British medical journal: "The smoking of cannabis, even long-term, is not harmful to health. ... It would be reasonable to judge cannabis as less of a threat ... than alcohol or tobacco."


According to a 1999 federally commissioned report by the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM), "Except for the harms associated with smoking, the adverse effects of marijuana use are within the range tolerated for other medications."

The National Academy of Sciences further found, "There is no conclusive evidence that the drug effects of marijuana are causally linked to the subsequent abuse of other illicit drugs."

More than 76 million Americans have admittedly tried marijuana. The overwhelming majority of these users did not go on to become regular marijuana users, try other illicit drugs, or suffer any deleterious effects to their health.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 35 percent of adults admit to having tried marijuana. Of these, only 5 percent have used marijuana in the past year, and only 3 percent have used marijuana in the past month.

According to former U.S. President Jimmy Carter: "Penalties against drug use should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself. Nowhere is this more clear than in the laws against the possession of marijuana in private for personal use."

Convicted marijuana offenders are denied federal financial student aid, welfare and food stamps, and may be removed from public housing. Other non-drug violations do not carry such penalties. In many states, convicted marijuana offenders are automatically stripped of their driving privileges, even if the offense is not driving related.
Under federal law, possessing a single marijuana cigarette or less is punishable by up to one year in prison and a $10,000 fine, the same penalty as possession of small amounts of heroin, cocaine or crack.  

In several states, marijuana offenders may receive maximum sentences of life in prison.  

A recent national study found that blacks are arrested for marijuana offenses at higher rates than whites in 90 percent of 700 U.S. counties investigated. In 64 percent of these counties, the black arrest rate for marijuana violations was more than twice the arrest rate for whites.  

**TALKING POINT #3: Decriminalization does not lead to greater marijuana use.**

Government studies conclude that marijuana decriminalization has had virtually no effect on either marijuana use or beliefs and related attitudes about marijuana among American young people in those states that have enacted such a policy.  

Citizens who live under decriminalization laws consume marijuana at rates less than or comparable to those who live in regions where the possession of marijuana remains a criminal offense.  

There is no evidence that marijuana decriminalization affects either the choice or frequency of use of drugs, either legal (such as alcohol) or illegal (such as marijuana and cocaine).  

States and regions that have maintained the strictest criminal penalties for marijuana possession have experienced the largest proportionate increase in use.

Rates of hard drug use (illicit drugs other than marijuana) among emergency room patients are substantially higher in states that have not decriminalized marijuana use. Experts speculate that this is because the lack of decriminalization may encourage the greater use of drugs that are even more dangerous than marijuana.


**TALKING POINT #4: Criminal laws prohibiting marijuana possession do not deter marijuana use.**

Marijuana use remains consistent despite a high level of enforcement, and there is no detectable relationship between changes in enforcement and levels of marijuana use over time.


Marijuana users believe that their behavior will go undetected; thus fear of arrest is usually not a factor in people's decisions whether or not to use it.


Marijuana laws have no "specific" deterrent impact on drug taking behavior. Studies show that marijuana offenders continue to use marijuana after their conviction at rates equal to those prior to their arrest. No relation between the actual or perceived severity of their previous sentence and subsequent use has been found.


In surveys, most individuals cite health concerns and family responsibilities rather than legal concerns as their primary reasons for ceasing (or never initiating) marijuana use.

A California police officer's study concluded, "The reduction in penalties for possession of marijuana for personal use does not appear to [be] a factor in people's decision to use or not use the drug."