Marijuana Regulation and Crime Rates

Adult use marijuana laws are not associated with an uptick overall criminal activity

“Using data covering the period 2000-2019 from a variety of national sources (the National Survey of Drug Use and Health, the Uniform Crime Reports, the National Vital Statistics System, and the Treatment Episode Data Set) this study is the first to comprehensively examine the effects of legalizing recreational marijuana on hard drug use, arrests, drug overdose deaths, suicides, and treatment admissions. Our analyses show that RMLs increase adult marijuana use and reduce drug-related arrests over an average post-legalization window of three to four years. There is little evidence to suggest that RML-induced increases in marijuana consumption encourage the use of harder substances or violent criminal activity.”

Is recreational marijuana use a gateway to harder drug use and crime? National Bureau of Economic Research, 2021

“This study provides evidence demonstrating a crime-reducing effect of recreational marijuana legalization in Colorado on neighboring states. Specifically, we observed that the property crime rate and larceny rate experienced substantial decreases in the border counties in neighboring states relative to non-border counties following the legalization in Colorado. … This finding suggests that recreational marijuana legalization in a state (e.g., Colorado) may not bring about negative consequences on crime in neighboring states, which challenges the assertions made by public officials in these neighboring states arguing a crime-inducing effect of legalization.”


Adult use legalization laws are associated with improvements in crime clearance rates

“Based on Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data from 2007 to 2017, this study used difference-in-differences (DID) analysis and the synthetic control method (SCM) to examine the effect of recreational marijuana legalization on the clearance rates for multiple types of violent crimes in Oregon (OR), a state that legalized recreational marijuana in late 2014. Results offer evidence suggesting a beneficial impact of legalization on violent crime clearances, as manifested by significant increases in the clearance rate for overall violent crimes and that for aggravated assault in OR counties relative to those in the non-legalized states following legalization.”


“[M]arijuana legalization and sales have had minimal to no effect on major crimes in Colorado or Washington. We observed no statistically significant long-term effects of recreational cannabis laws or the initiation of retail sales on violent or property crime rates in these states…Our results from Colorado and Washington suggest that legalization has not had major detrimental effects on public safety.”

The cannabis effect on crime: Time-series analysis of crime in Colorado and Washington State, Justice Quarterly, 2019

Medical cannabis regulatory laws are not associated with an uptick overall criminal activity

“In this paper we attempt to answer the question, does prohibition lead to a reduction in crime? To do so, we take advantage of the growing trend in medical marijuana laws in the U.S. that effectively end federal
prohibition of marijuana. We employ a difference-in-differences empirical strategy to exploit natural variation in these laws across states and time. ... [W]e estimate significant reductions in violent crime rates in states that legalize medicinal marijuana. Moreover, we find evidence that ending marijuana prohibition results in larger reductions in violent crime rates in states that border Mexico and in urban counties. We also find evidence that medical marijuana legalization reduces property crimes, with larger reductions in states that border Mexico.”

Smoke and Fears: The Effect of Marijuana Prohibition on Crime, Appalachian State University Department of Economics Working Paper, 2021

Retail cannabis facilities are not positively associated with increased criminality, and may play a role in the prevention of certain crimes, like larceny

“This paper studies the effects of marijuana legalization on neighborhood crime and documents the patterns in retail dispensary locations over time using detailed micro-level data from Denver, Colorado. ... The results imply that an additional dispensary in a neighborhood leads to a reduction of 17 crimes per month per 10,000 residents, which corresponds to roughly a 19 percent decline relative to the average crime rate over the sample period. ... Overall, our results suggest that dispensaries cause an overall reduction in crime in neighborhoods, with no evidence of spillovers to surrounding neighborhoods. ... Our results are consistent with theories that predict that marijuana legalization will displace illicit criminal organizations and decrease crime through changes in security behaviors or substitution toward more harmful substances. ... Lastly, there is no evidence that increased marijuana use itself results in additional crime.”