

## OPINION

TWO VIEWS  
LEGALIZING MARIJUANA

Today's marijuana is not the same substance from decades ago, write guest columnists Michael Mumper and Gregg Raduka. THC has soared in potency, with some commercial products exceeding 90% THC, a far cry from the 3% typical in the 1990s. Such claims are overblown scare tactics, counters guest columnist Paul Armentano. THE NEW YORK TIMES/2021

## Read the research before embracing legalized marijuana

Voters need to know about THC potency, psychiatric disorders and other issues found in scientific studies on cannabis use, especially for young people.

By Michael Mumper and Gregg Raduka

A recent Atlanta Journal-Constitution article, "Legalize marijuana, say most Georgians in an AJC poll" (May 3), paints a picture of inevitability regarding marijuana legalization in Georgia. But a closer examination of the survey, stories of the harms caused by high THC products, the shifting landscape of cannabis science and the dangerous gaps in public policy suggest this "majority" support is far from a public mandate.

While the poll claims that nearly 56% of respondents favor legalizing recreational marijuana, this result is based on only 1,000 registered voters. That's less than one-hundredth of 1% of Georgia's population. Moreover, the poll frames the issue in a binary yes/no format, with no room for respondents to weigh legitimate public health concerns, regulatory readiness or nuances around THC potency.

Simple surveys like this fail to capture the complexity of the marijuana policy issues, especially when those same policies would require amending Georgia's constitution, a virtually irreversible decision if later found to be harmful to our state's children. This is critical, as legalization can decrease how harmful children and teens think marijuana could be in their own life and could prompt them to start or increase their usage. No one wants to see their child dependent on cannabis.

### New research shows there is harm from marijuana usage

What is missing from the current debate is the rapidly evolving body of peer-reviewed research warning of marijuana's public health risks. Today's marijuana is not the same substance people recall from decades ago. THC — the psychoactive compound in marijuana — has soared in potency, with some commercial products exceeding 90% THC, a far cry from the 3% typical in the 1990s. This escalation has been directly linked in studies to a rise in psychosis, schizophrenia-like symptoms and emergency psychiatric hospitalizations, especially among young users. A 2022 systematic review in *The Lancet Psychiatry* found high-potency cannabis use to be strongly associated with increased risk of psychotic disorders.

Equally troubling, recent studies show that approximately 3 in 10 marijuana users now develop some form of cannabis use disorder — a clinical diagnosis that often involves dependence and withdrawal. This statistic, confirmed by National Institutes of Health-funded research, challenges the long-standing myth that marijuana is "non-addictive" and safer than alcohol.

hol. If anything, its growing prevalence, commercialization and ever-increasing THC levels make it a unique threat to Georgia's families and youth.

Recent international research underscores the concerns about youth cannabis use post-legalization. A peer-reviewed study published in *JAMA Network Open* found that in Canadian provinces where cannabis edibles and extracts were legalized in October 2019, there was a 26% increase in overall teen cannabis use, with edible consumption alone rising by 43%. These findings suggest that legalization, especially of products appealing to youth, can lead to significant upticks in adolescent use. Such trends raise alarms about the potential for similar outcomes in Georgia, should recreational marijuana be legalized without stringent safeguards to protect our youth.

In addition, there is hardly any measurement and reporting of THC levels in deceased and impaired drivers in Georgia, so we (unlike a number of other states) have no idea how many people are dying on our highways every week because of THC impairment. This means that an important public safety hazard has gone largely unaddressed. We are on the brink of legalizing a mind-altering substance while flying blind on traffic safety data.

### Cannabis legalization could further widen racial equity gaps

To be clear, Georgians for Responsible Marijuana Policy's opposition to legalization is not rooted in stigma or outdated beliefs, but in a sincere desire to protect public health, youth welfare, pregnant mothers and road safety.

There are also racial equity concerns worth exploring, but commercialization has not been shown to resolve such systemic inequalities. In fact, it has frequently enriched large corporations while disproportionately exposing disadvantaged communities to heavy marketing and high addiction rates — the same communities that end the war on drugs was supposed to help.

As Georgia lawmakers consider how to move forward, we urge voters and policymakers not to be swayed by polling headlines based on binary surveys or the false notion that legalization is harmless or inevitable.

If the AJC wants to conduct another poll, let it ask Georgians whether they support legalization even when it means higher rates of addiction, psychosis and impaired driving with no practical testing infrastructure.

Michael Mumper is executive director and Gregg Raduka, Ph.D., ICPS, is chair of the governmental affairs committee for Georgians for Responsible Marijuana Policy in Fayetteville.

## Claims of high potency are overblown, research shows

Thirteen years into states' marijuana legalization experiment in America, public support for de-criminalizing its use has never been higher.

By Paul Armentano

From the onset of marijuana prohibition, criminalization advocates sought to advance their agenda — an unduly influence the public — by sensationalizing the supposed strength of cannabis.

In the 1930s, while lobbying for the first-ever federal ban on cannabis, Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry Anslinger alleged that the marijuana of a century ago was so uniquely potent that it was "entirely the monster Hyde, the harmful effect of which cannot be measured."

Since then, legalization opponents have repeatedly alleged that cannabis' potency has exponentially grown stronger. Testifying before Congress in 1996, then-Sen. Joe Biden opined that the potency of 1990s weed was unlike anything America had ever seen. "It's like comparing buckshot in a shotgun shell to a laser-guided missile," he said.

Modern day prohibitionists like Michael Mumper and Gregg Raduka ("Georgians should read the research before embracing legalized marijuana," AJC, May 30) continue to engage in this same rhetorical tactic — alleging that today's commercialized marijuana products are a "far cry" from the 1990s "laser-guided missile" weed.

### Cannabis can be overconsumed, but so can alcohol

Let's set the record straight. First, the availability of higher-potency cannabis products is not a phenomenon unique to today's state-legal markets. In fact, more potent products like hashish have always been publicly available.

Typically, when consumers encounter higher strength marijuana, they ingest lesser quantities of it. This self-regulatory process is known as self-titration.

Second, higher potency marijuana products do not dominate state-legal markets. In fact, retail sales records from legal states show that most consumers tend to prefer and gravitate toward lesser strength products.

Third, unlike alcohol (which is readily available in a variety of potencies, including highly potent formulations like grain alcohol and absinthe), THC is incapable of causing lethal overdose — regardless of its potency or the quantity consumed.

That's not to say that cannabis products cannot be overconsumed. They can. But in such instances, consumers typically experience only temporary dysphoria (commonly referred to as a panic attack) — the effects of which dissipate within a few hours. (By contrast, alcohol overconsumption is associated with some 2,200 overdose deaths annually.)

### Medical study debunks psychosis cases increase reports

Nonetheless, in order to discourage overconsumption, most states regulate certain cannabis products, like edibles, to single serving sizes. All legal states require that products' potencies appear on their labels so consumers can make informed decisions prior to consuming them.

In some instances, overexposure to higher strength products might induce temporary psychotic-like symptoms. However, such incidents are exceedingly rare and are typically exclusive to those who are either predisposed to or have a preexisting psychiatric disorder. (Notably, exposure to high-potency alcohol also triggers psychosis in certain consumers.)

Specifically, an exhaustive study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* determined that "state medical and recreational cannabis policies were not associated with a statistically significant increase in rates of psychosis-related health outcomes."

Overall, most Americans are happy with cannabis legalization. Thirteen years into states' marijuana legalization experiment, public support for making marijuana legal nationwide has never been higher. To date, 24 states have legalized the adult-use market. None of these states have ever repealed their legalization laws. That's because these policies are working largely as voters and politicians intended — and because they are preferable to cannabis criminalization.

Ultimately, any potential harms associated with cannabis are best mitigated by a policy of legalization, regulation and education. They are only exacerbated by criminalization, sensationalism and stigmatization.

Paul Armentano is the deputy director of NORML, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

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