

GENERAL TALKING POINTS

# Marijuana Legalization

Big Marijuana is the new **Big Tobacco**. After a decade of state-level legalization, the peer-reviewed record and federal data converge: today's marijuana is **exponentially more potent**, daily use is at record highs, mental-health and roadway harms are climbing, and the U.S. is now the world's largest illegal market — all while the industry consolidates under tobacco-industry money.

**THE TOPLINE**

## Five things to lead with

- The move to legalize marijuana is really a move to **commercialize** marijuana for profit. Today's marijuana industry is the new Big Tobacco — and marijuana should **remain prohibited at the federal and state level**.
- The country is moving too fast. The only people who benefit from a rush to legalize are a small number of investors.<sup>1</sup>
- Today's marijuana is a different drug than the marijuana of the 1970s. Flower routinely tests at **18–23% THC**; concentrates, edibles, and vapes routinely top **95–99% THC**.<sup>2,3</sup>
- You do not need to legalize to reform the criminal-justice system. Penalties can be removed and records expunged *without* commercializing today's high-potency products.
- The industry is consolidating under existing giants of addiction. Altria put **\$1.8B into Cronos Group** and **\$12.8B into Juul** in 2018 alone — the tobacco playbook moving to the marijuana market.<sup>4,5</sup>

**TODAY'S MARIJUANA · POTENCY & ADDICTION**

## This is not your parents' joint

- Mean THC concentration in U.S. marijuana climbed from **3.94% in 1995 to 16.14% in 2022** (U Miss Potency Monitoring Project).<sup>2</sup>
- Industrial derivatives sold as "wax," "shatter," and "budder" contain up to **99% THC** — a roughly 30-fold increase over the marijuana of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup>
- NIH, Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic, and the World Health Organization all confirm: marijuana is **addictive** and produces withdrawal and dependence.<sup>6</sup>
- More than **20,000 peer-reviewed studies** link marijuana use to adverse mental-health outcomes, from depression to psychosis.<sup>7</sup>
- Regular adolescent use is associated with **up to an 8-point IQ drop** that may be irreversible (NIH).<sup>8</sup>

**YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS**

## A generational shift in daily use

- Daily marijuana use among young adults **now exceeds daily alcohol use** — a first on record in the federal Monitoring the Future survey.<sup>9</sup>
- The number of daily or near-daily marijuana users in the U.S. rose **+1,867% from 1992 to 2022** (Caulkins, *Addiction*, 2023).<sup>10</sup>
- Adolescent cannabis-related ER visits in legalized states ran **+88%, +479%, and +115%** above non-legalized states in 2019, 2020, and 2021.<sup>11</sup>
- Colorado holds the top national ranking for first-time marijuana use among youth (NSDUH, the only population-wide federal drug survey for Americans 12+).<sup>12</sup>
- About **22% of students in grades 9–12** reported being offered, sold, or given illegal drugs on school property in the previous 12 months (Nat'l Center for Education Statistics).<sup>13</sup>

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## MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOSIS

### Higher rates of psychosis, schizophrenia, and suicide

- Daily users of high-potency marijuana have **four-times higher odds of psychosis** than non-users (Di Forti et al., 2019).<sup>14</sup>
- A meta-analysis of cannabis-use studies confirmed a **dose-dependent increase in psychosis risk** tied to frequency of use and product potency (Marconi et al., 2016).<sup>16</sup>
- In Denmark, the share of schizophrenia cases attributable to cannabis use disorder rose from **2% in 1995 to 8% in 2010**; researchers estimated as many as **~1 in 5 schizophrenia cases among young males** could be prevented if CUD were averted.<sup>15</sup>
- Adult past-year marijuana users were **more than twice as likely** as the general population to make a suicide plan (3.2% vs 1.4%) or attempt suicide (1.4% vs 0.6%) – SAMHSA NSDUH, 2023.<sup>12</sup>
- Hospitalizations for marijuana-induced psychosis are higher in states with legal marijuana; Colorado adolescent suicides ages 15–19 have **nearly doubled since legalization**, with marijuana the most common substance in post-mortem youth toxicology reports.<sup>17</sup>
- Up to **47% of regular marijuana users** experience withdrawal symptoms when they cease use – a clinical marker of dependence (NIDA).<sup>8</sup>

## DRUGGED DRIVING

### Legalization has compromised road safety

- **1 in 4 Colorado road deaths** involve marijuana (Leavitt et al., 2024).<sup>18</sup>
- Marijuana-impaired-driving fatalities have **more than doubled** in Colorado and Washington since legalization (Highway Loss Data Institute).<sup>19</sup>
- The share of Washington drivers testing positive for marijuana rose from **1 in 10 to 1 in 5** after legalization (Washington Traffic Safety Commission; AAA Foundation, 2016).<sup>20</sup>
- Of **~4,000 Colorado drivers tested** for marijuana in 2016, **73% had the drug in their system** (CO Division of Criminal Justice).<sup>21</sup>
- The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported a **6% rise in collision-claim frequency** across five states after recreational legalization – the kind of population-level signal that does not show up until impairment is widespread.<sup>19</sup>
- Marijuana **impairs reaction time and lane discipline for hours** after use – yet there is no federal impairment standard akin to a 0.08 BAC.<sup>18</sup>

## CRIME & PUBLIC SAFETY

### Arrests for violent and property crime rose in legalizing states

- The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City found legalization is associated with **+18% violent-crime arrests** and **+16% property-crime arrests** across treated states (Brown, Cohen & Felix, 2023).<sup>22</sup>
- A peer-reviewed Oregon study (Wu et al., 2021) measured average post-legalization increases of **+365 property crimes, +205 larceny, +104 burglary, +56 motor-vehicle theft, +49 violent crime, and +39 aggravated assault** per 100,000 vs. non-legalized states.<sup>23</sup>
- Each new Chicago recreational dispensary lifted crime **~30%** within its 500-meter halo (Kong, 2023).<sup>24</sup>
- Denver neighborhoods adjacent to marijuana businesses saw **+84.8 more property crimes per year** than neighborhoods without one (Freisthler et al., 2017).<sup>25</sup>
- Colorado's overall crime rate grew **~11× faster** than the 30 largest U.S. cities post-legalization; the CBI reported a **+36.5% rise in violent crime** from 2013 to 2018.<sup>26</sup>
- A Chicago HIDTA survey of Illinois police found **26% of officers identified marijuana as the biggest contributor to violent crime** in their area of responsibility – with 27% putting it among the top three drug threats statewide.<sup>36</sup>

# Marijuana Legalization

## BLACK MARKET & CHINESE ORGANIZED CRIME

### The U.S. is now the world's largest illegal marijuana market – run from inside "legal" states

- The DEA's **2025 National Drug Threat Assessment**: Chinese transnational criminal organizations "*dominate the domestic cultivation and distribution of marijuana, with most grow sites located in states where the cannabis industry is 'legal.'*"<sup>27</sup>
- **Oklahoma alone** accounted for **66%** of all DEA-seized illegal marijuana in 2024.<sup>27</sup>
- A single 2024 California operation eradicated **900,000+ illegal plants from 855 sites in 12 weeks** – with 55.6 tons of processed marijuana, 156 weapons, and 209 arrests.<sup>27</sup>
- **~80%** of the 3,000+ illegal Oklahoma grows tied to foreign organized crime are linked to **Chinese networks** (House Select Committee on the CCP testimony).<sup>28</sup>
- ProPublica documented **forced labor, sexual abuse, and worker deaths** on illegal Chinese-linked grows operating inside "legal" states.<sup>29</sup>
- Despite "legal" status, an estimated **~75% of marijuana sold in California is still from the illicit market** (Politico, 2021) – legalization did not extinguish the underground market; it absorbed and supplied it.<sup>37</sup>

## BIG TOBACCO PLAYBOOK

### Industry consolidation tracks the 1950s tobacco script

- Altria's **\$1.8B Cronos Group stake** and **\$12.8B Juul investment** in 2018 signaled tobacco-major entry into the cannabinoid market – with publicly stated interest in U.S. marijuana once federal law permits.<sup>4,5</sup>
- The promotional script – "*safer alternative,*" "*harmless plant,*" "*wellness,*" "*medical*" – mirrors 1950s Big Tobacco messaging on cigarettes, as documented in Milbank Quarterly (Barry, Hiilamo & Glantz, 2014).<sup>30</sup>
- **70% of Colorado dispensaries** have been documented recommending THC products to *pregnant mothers* for nausea – without medical authorization.<sup>31</sup>
- "Medical" marijuana dispensaries routinely recommend products for conditions the FDA has not approved cannabinoids to treat (Dickson et al., *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 2018).<sup>32</sup>
- Pharma followed tobacco into the cannabinoid market: **Pfizer acquired Arena Pharmaceuticals for \$6.7 billion** in 2022, adding cannabinoid intellectual property to its drug-development pipeline.<sup>38</sup>
- Beverage giant **Constellation Brands invested \$4 billion in Canopy Growth** in 2018 – the same playbook tobacco used with vapes, applied to cannabis-infused drinks.<sup>4</sup>

## SOCIAL JUSTICE

### Legalization did not close racial-disparity gaps

- African Americans remain **~twice as likely** to be arrested for marijuana in Colorado and Washington post-legalization.<sup>33</sup>
- In Colorado 2012–2014, marijuana arrests for Hispanic and African-American teens **rose 29% and 58%** respectively, while arrests for white youth **fell 8%** (CO Dept. of Public Safety).<sup>34</sup>
- Higher marijuana-dispensary density has been documented in **racially diverse, lower-income neighborhoods** – mirroring the historical placement of alcohol and tobacco retail.<sup>35</sup>
- Federal prosecution of marijuana trafficking has **not decreased proportionally** with state-level legalization: most cases now involve diversion *out of* "legal" states (DEA, 2025).<sup>27</sup>
- The marijuana industry's lobbying is concentrated in **state capitols, not Black or Latino community organizations** – a pattern the brand kit calls "social-justice cover" for a commercial agenda whose harms fall disproportionately on the same communities.<sup>33,34</sup>

# Endnotes

All statistics drawn from peer-reviewed studies, federal data (NIDA, DEA, Federal Reserve, Monitoring the Future), and official state statistics, as compiled in the SAM Impact Report 2026–2027.

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