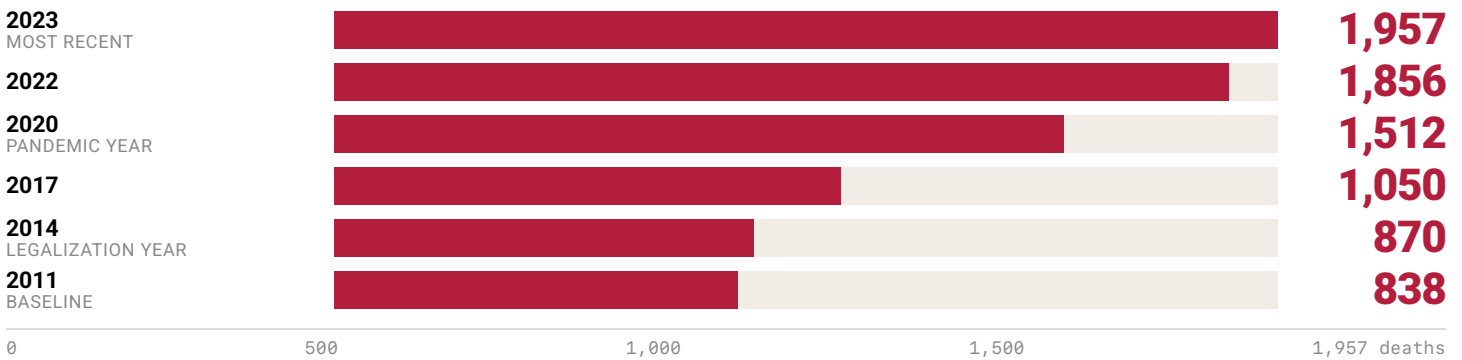


Marijuana, Opioids & Pain

The marijuana industry has promoted legalization as “the exit to the opioid crisis.” A decade of **individual-level, peer-reviewed evidence** shows the opposite: marijuana users are **2–3× more likely to misuse opioids**, opioid overdose deaths in “legal” states have **accelerated rather than declined**, and meta-analyses find marijuana **no better than placebo** for chronic pain.

COLORADO OPIOID OVERDOSE FATALITIES · CDPHE + CDC NCHS

Opioid overdose deaths in Colorado more than doubled after legalization¹



INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATA · WHAT GROUP-LEVEL STUDIES MISS^{2,3}

Marijuana users are **2–3× more likely to misuse opioids**

2.6×

MORE LIKELY TO MISUSE
NONPRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS²

2.5×

MORE LIKELY TO DEVELOP
PRESCRIPTION-OPIOID ABUSE³

A 2021 study found marijuana use was **34% higher** in patients who misused prescription opioids than in those who did not.⁴

ADOLESCENTS · LEGAL VS. NON-LEGAL STATES⁵

Overdose deaths grew far faster in “legal” states



Bleyer et al. (2024) found marijuana-legal states **outpaced non-legal states** in adolescent overdose deaths every year studied.

CHRONIC NON-CANCER PAIN · THE LANCET PUBLIC HEALTH^{6,7}

There is no evidence marijuana eases chronic pain or reduces opioid prescribing.

A 4-year prospective Lancet study found **no effect** on pain severity or opioid use.⁶ A 2022 meta-analysis concluded marijuana is **no better than placebo**.⁷ Yet 90% of Colorado medical-marijuana cardholders cite severe pain as their reason.⁸

SURGERY & ANESTHESIA · JOURNAL OF CLINICAL ANESTHESIA⁹

+14%

Inhaled anesthetic needed for preoperative cannabis users

Marijuana use **lowers pain thresholds**, so users require more anesthetic during surgery and more opioid medication afterward — the opposite of the promised harm-reduction story.⁹

INDUSTRY MYTH VS. THE PEER-REVIEWED RECORD^{8,10,11}

90%

of Colorado medical-marijuana cardholders cite **severe pain** as their reason — against the weight of pain-trial evidence.⁸

+23%

increase in **opioid-related deaths** in medical-marijuana states after 2010, reversing earlier “reduction” claims.¹⁰

+0%

change in **opioid prescribing** after legalization in the most rigorous longitudinal study to date.¹¹

Endnotes

All statistics in this brief are drawn from peer-reviewed studies (JAMA Internal Medicine, American Journal of Psychiatry, *The Lancet Public Health*, JAMA Network Open, Journal of Clinical Anesthesia), federal sources (CDC, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, CDC NCHS Vital Statistics), and SAM's *Lessons Learned from State Marijuana Legalization – Impact Report 2026–2027*. Where group-level (ecological) and individual-level findings conflict, the more rigorous individual-level result is cited.

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