



# HAWAII IMPACT REPORT



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# HAWAII IMPACT REPORT

## Outcomes from States That Legalized Recreational Marijuana

### INTRODUCTION:

**This report is for people who live in Hawai'i.**

The debate over whether to legalize recreational marijuana is actively underway, and decisions made this year carry long-term, life-altering consequences for our communities. While these discussions continue at the Hawai'i State Capitol, most residents are not paying close attention, and many do not yet have access to the data needed to understand what legalization has meant elsewhere.

For that reason, **Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM)** was asked to compile data relevant to Hawai'i to assess whether to legalize recreational marijuana. Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM) is a nonpartisan nonprofit founded in 2013 by former Congressman Patrick J. Kennedy (D-RI), senior editor of The Atlantic, and speechwriter for President George W. Bush, David Frum, and Senior Obama White House Drug Policy Advisor Dr. Kevin Sabet. SAM advocates for a health-first approach to marijuana policy, aiming to reduce use and prevent the commercialization of a new addiction-for-profit industry. Parts of this report are drawn from the 2026-2027 SAM Impact Report, which provides a detailed analysis of the effects of marijuana legalization nationwide.

The data show the consistent impacts from states that have legalized marijuana. In states that legalized, **illicit markets surged, organized criminal networks and cartels moved in, youth and families were harmed, and land and water were damaged.**

Hawai'i is small. Families live close together. 'Ohana, community, and the environment are tightly connected. When something goes wrong here, it affects everyone.

#### **What this report is asking you to do:**

- Read the facts.
- Share them with people you care about.
- And tell your legislators to vote **NO** on legalizing recreational marijuana in Hawai'i.

## **IMPACTS:**

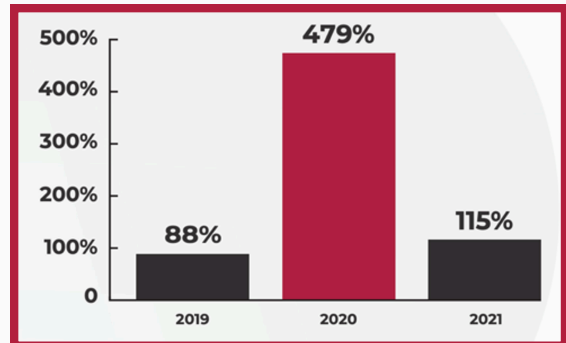
### **IMMEDIATE HARM TO YOUTH:**

Legalization has increased overdose rates and use among youth.

#### **>> OVERDOSE RATES IN ADOLESCENTS:**

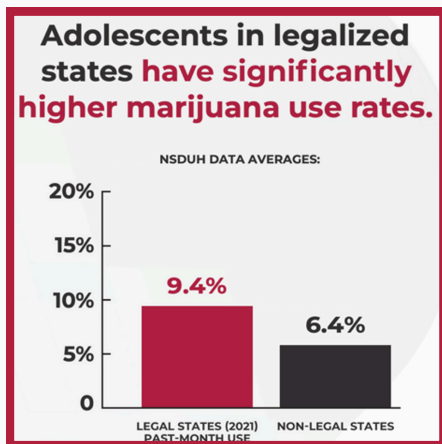
When comparing the overdose rates of Hawaii to states like California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska, which have all legalized marijuana and experimented with some form of drug decriminalization, Hawaii is by far the lowest.

Evidence indicates that marijuana legalization is associated with rises in overdose deaths. States with legal marijuana saw the greatest [increase](#) in overdose deaths and outpaced non-legal states by 88% in 2019, 479% in 2020, and 115% (1).



#### **>> INCREASED YOUTH MARIJUANA USE:**

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health ([NDSUH](#)) data, adolescent marijuana use rates are notably higher in states where marijuana is legalized (2).



A longitudinal [study](#) of marijuana use of over 3,000 adolescents (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders) and almost 2,000 college students at Hawaii's public schools was conducted. While marijuana is illegal unless used for medicinal purposes, the study indicated one to five percent of the students used marijuana daily/weekly or for experimental use. It also found that the daily/weekly users had low academic involvement, greater sensation seeking/risk-taking activity, and higher cannabis use disorder (3).

#### **>> TODAY'S HIGH-POTENCY THC IS A DIFFERENT DRUG:**

Marijuana sold in stores today is much more potent, addictive, and harmful than the marijuana of the past.

**The 1970s marijuana contained on average 1-3% THC.** Today, that number is around **16%** for flower products, and much higher for concentrates, which have recently entered the market (4). Products such as dabs (concentrated THC) can contain up to 99%. High-potency marijuana products have become increasingly popular, which is great for Big Marijuana and terrible for Americans.

The increase in high-potency marijuana has led to more mental health issues. For example, one in three people who use marijuana develops **Cannabis Use Disorder** (CUD) (5). Users who consume high-potency marijuana are **four times** more likely to develop psychosis (6).

### **CRIME AND MARKET REALITY:**

Legalization affects crime, expands black markets, and attracts foreign drug cartels.

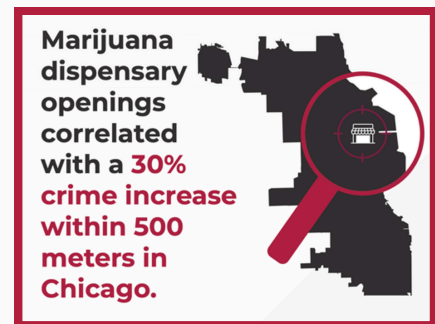
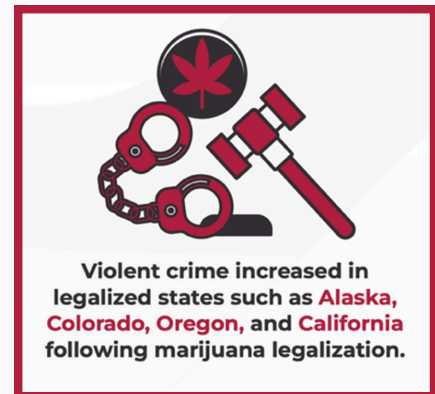
#### **>> CRIME:**

Marijuana legalization and the subsequent commercialization that follows, have dramatic impacts on violent crime rates. California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska all experienced increases in violent crime following marijuana legalization.

Because Colorado was one of the first states to legalize recreational marijuana, there is a wealth of data from the state highlighting many issues related to its legalization.

- Denver neighborhoods near dispensaries have **85 more property crimes** per year than those without (7).
- Colorado's crime rate in 2016 increased **11 times faster** than the 30 largest cities in the nation since legalization (8).
- A University of Colorado **study** found crime rates up to 1,452% higher in neighborhoods with at least one marijuana dispensary (9).

Additionally, cities such as Chicago have also seen a rise in **crime** in neighborhoods with retail marijuana dispensaries (10).



#### **>> BLACK MARKET EXPANSION:**

Arguments have been made that federal laws that make the drug illegal, create a crime crisis around it and the sooner state governments legalize the drug, the sooner the black markets—and the violence and disorder associated with them—will disappear.

However, the evidence to date shows that marijuana legalization **does not eliminate illegal markets**. In fact, it often worsens them, fueling a thriving underground economy that runs parallel to, and sometimes within, the legal system. For example, California is the largest legal marijuana market in the nation, and yet, **illegal grows outnumber legal ones by as much as 10:1** (11).

Conversely, 85–90% of California-grown marijuana is exported out of state, including states where marijuana is not legal. In Oregon, authorities seized **1,330,766** illicit marijuana plants in 2021, an increase of 17.3 times from 2020 and an increase of 253 times from 2018 (12). Illegal actors do not recede when marijuana is legalized; instead, they innovate and exploit the regulatory loopholes and weak enforcement.

## >> INVITES FOREIGN DRUG CARTELS:

Foreign drug cartels are a dominant force in the U.S. illicit marijuana market, and marijuana legalization makes it easier for them to operate.

Legalization is giving [Mexican and Chinese cartels](#) an avenue to operate legally in America.

Below are experiences of states with legalized marijuana (13):

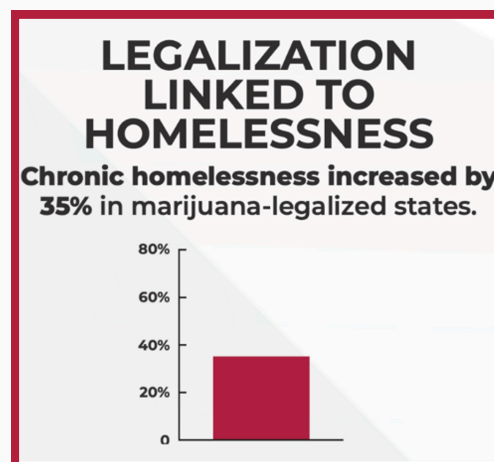
- [Wall Street Journal](#): “Following the legalization of marijuana in many states, Chinese-run marijuana farms have emerged across the U.S. Some are **run by investor groups** with a commercial growing license” (14).
- [Drug Enforcement Administration](#): “Chinese and other Asian drug trafficking organizations **collect millions of dollars in illicit drug proceeds** from cultivating and trafficking marijuana and the money is used to fund other criminal activities, to include trafficking in other drugs, money laundering, and human trafficking” (15).
- Over [3,000](#) illegal marijuana grows in Oklahoma are tied to foreign mafias; **80% linked to Chinese criminal groups** (16). Four human trafficking victims were [killed in an execution-style murder](#) at a Chinese marijuana farm in 2022 (17).
- Maine’s top marijuana regulator [admitted](#) that the state is giving licenses to foreign criminal groups (18). These Chinese marijuana farms are worth an estimated [\\$4.37 billion](#) (19).
- Eventually, the Chinese marijuana cartels caught the attention of lawmakers. In 2024, a **bipartisan group of federal lawmakers sent a [letter](#) urging the Department of Justice to address the growing presence of Chinese-owned marijuana farms.** (20)
- The growing concern for Hawai’i is the increase in foreign cartels establishing their presence in the state. The **Chinese Organized Crime Syndicate already has a footprint in Hawaii** in the form of human trafficking, money laundering, and illicit drug trafficking. Legalization will widen the door of opportunity to these organizations.

## COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN:

The connection between legalization and homelessness.

## >> CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS INCREASES:

Marijuana legalization has also been found to impact homelessness rates. One [study](#) found that chronic homelessness increased by 35% in states with legalized marijuana (21).

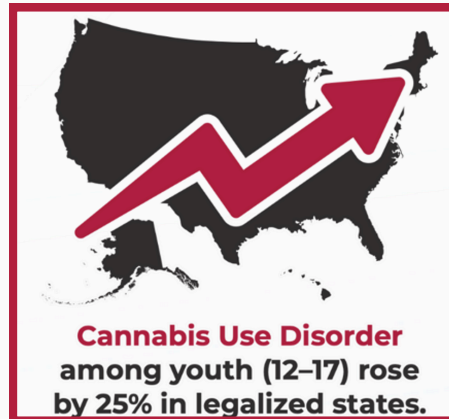


## HEALTH IMPACTS:

The effects of legalization on addiction and mental and physical health.

### >> CANNABIS USE DISORDER:

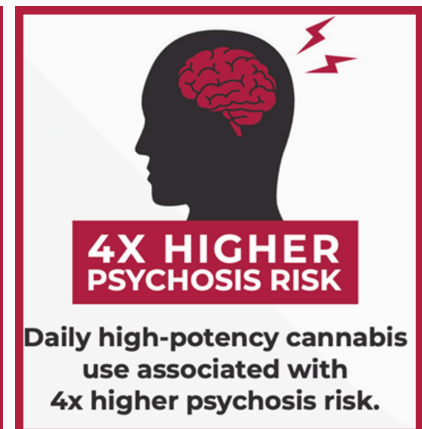
Data show that Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD), which is the scientific verbiage for marijuana addiction, increases at a [25%](#) increased rate in states that have legalized marijuana, compared to states that have not (22).



### >> INCREASE IN PSYCHOSIS:

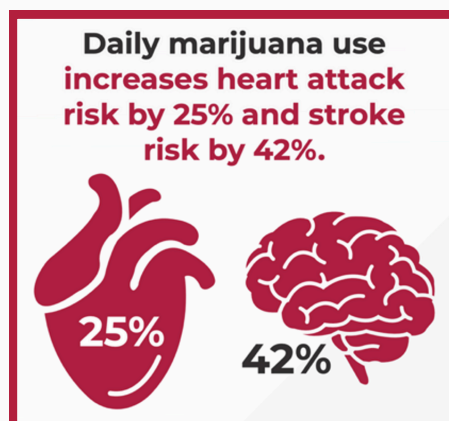
High-potency marijuana users are [four](#) times more likely to develop psychosis (23). [Data](#) shows that states with legalized marijuana have experienced a **sharp increase in hospitalizations** due to marijuana-induced psychosis (24).

Another [study](#) linked marijuana legalization to a **rise in youth hospital visits for psychosis** (25).



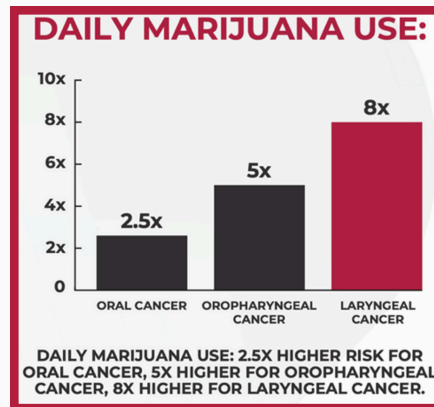
### >> CARDIOVASCULAR RISK:

A 2024 [study](#) published by the Journal of the American Heart Association found that daily marijuana use **raises the risk of heart attack by 25% and stroke by 42%** (26).



## >> CANCER RISK:

A [study](#) published in The Journal of the American Medical Association Otolaryngology–Head & Neck Surgery found that daily marijuana use is linked to a 2.5 times higher risk of oral cancer, a 5 times higher risk of oropharyngeal cancer, and an 8 times higher risk of laryngeal cancer (27).



## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS:

**Marijuana cultivation and illegal grows impact land, water and ecosystems.**

Discussions about legalizing marijuana often overlook the environmental threat the industry presents. Due to limited data, it's hard to gauge marijuana's full impact. Still, early signs suggest harmful effects. [Research](#) shows that **indoor marijuana grows emit as much CO2 as 3.3 million cars on the road** (28). A 2021 [report](#) from the American Chemical Society identified six impact pathways from cannabis cultivation: land-cover change, water use, pesticide use, energy use, air pollution, and water pollution (29). It is important to note that **the environment is at risk of pollution from both "legal" and illegal marijuana operations. Regulatory standards are lacking, and enforcement is weak.**

A 2015 [study](#) on the impact of marijuana cultivation on watersheds in California found that individual marijuana plants require 22.7 liters of water daily (30). Production facilities range in daily water demand from 523,144 liters to 724,016 liters. A 2021 [article](#) from the Brookings Institution also found that: **"The scale of the problem is staggering: At the end of 2020, illegal cannabis grows sucked up between 11.4 million and 36.3 million liters of water daily. The widespread illegal cultivation contributes to water depletion and conflict over water and has other bad environmental consequences"** (31).

As marijuana legalization expands, so does the illegal market and the environmental threat it creates. However, illegal marijuana isn't the only problem. Marijuana cultivation requires and uses a large amount of power. **Indoor marijuana grows, which account for 80% of all cultivation, are very inefficient** (32). In fact, indoor cultivation consumes 709 kBtu/sq ft, while a typical home or office uses only 40–50 kBtu/sq ft. In Massachusetts, **indoor marijuana cultivation accounts for 10% of the state's industrial electricity use**. Because it's so energy-intensive, marijuana cultivation results in emissions comparable to those from coal mining in Colorado (33, 34).

Illicit grow operations and extraction labs have also **caused wildfires**, such as the 125,000-acre Dolan Fire in Los Padres National Park in California in 2020, which killed endangered condors, destroyed homes and a fire station, seriously injured firefighters, and cost nearly \$63 million to contain (35, 36).

**Legalization has thus far caused significant environmental damage**, and as the industry continues to grow, the full consequences may not be understood in time to prevent worse outcomes.



## **REVENUE VS COST:**

### **Marijuana tax revenues outweighed by costs**

**Regulated marijuana has not become the revenue cash cow that industry advocates promised.** Despite having some of the highest marijuana taxes in the country, **California has still not experienced a boom in tax revenue.** The [FY21–22](#) marijuana tax revenue made up only 0.49% of the state's entire budget (37).

The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) found that in only one state, marijuana excise taxes accounted for more than 1.5% of the state's total tax revenue in the last quarter of 2024 (38).

Against these estimates, states also need to weigh the associated costs. Most notably, a [study](#) in **Colorado found that every \$1 in tax revenue from marijuana was associated with \$4.50 in costs**, ranging from additional health care expenditures to more students dropping out of school (39).

In [2022](#), California reduced several marijuana-related taxes in an attempt to save “failing” marijuana businesses (40). In [reality](#), many state-legal growers had already abandoned the bureaucracy and gone illegal (41).

Marijuana license holders [complain](#) that “legal” states are overly regulated and that taxes on the drug are too high (42). They argue that regulation and taxes are the main reasons black markets persist.

However, in California, this claim is flawed for several reasons. The regulatory and compliance systems in place in “legal” states were established with little foresight. State compliance officials are often caught off guard as various regulatory and compliance issues come to light. The Oregon Liquor Control Commission ([OLCC](#)) noted in a 2018 report that: “due to the legally required rapid implementation of the recreational program, OLCC has not been able to implement robust compliance monitoring and enforcement controls and processes for the recreational marijuana program” (43).

## **DECLINING PUBLIC SUPPORT:**

### **Waning public support after states experience the impacts of legalization.**

Hawai'i continues to watch the national momentum for marijuana legalization as support has been decreasing since it peaked a few years ago and declined considerably in more recent years.

One Gallup [Poll](#) found that overall support for marijuana legalization decreased by nearly 9% since its peak in 2023. This same poll showed a 27.3% drop in support among Republicans and an 8.4% drop among Independents (44).

A 2024 Gallup [Poll](#) also revealed that Americans' perceptions of marijuana's impact on society and users have worsened significantly. The poll found that most Americans now view marijuana's influence on society and users as negative (45).

In 2022, 49% of Americans believed that marijuana had a positive effect on society. By 2024, that number declined to 41%. This same poll also showed that 54% of Americans think marijuana has a negative effect on society.

In 2022, 53% of respondents believed marijuana had a positive effect on users. **By 2024, that number dropped to 43%.** The decrease in support differed among various groups, with 13% among non-religious groups and 12% among Independents, followed by Democrats (9%) and young adults (7%).

The decline is not just at the polls. **States like Massachusetts, Maine, and Arizona have begun the process of overturning marijuana legalization through ballot initiatives.**

The campaign in Massachusetts recently announced it had collected over 75,000 signatures needed to qualify for the 2026 ballot.

### **FINAL WORD AND CALL TO ACTION:**

If you live in Hawai'i, **share this report with your state legislators and urge them to vote NO on recreational marijuana legalization.**

The data presented document **what follows when states have legalized marijuana use:** illicit markets surge, organized criminal networks and cartels move in, youth addiction rises and families are harmed; and environmental damage grows uncontrolled with limited regulatory control and enforcement. In states like Colorado, marijuana did not remain limited or medical use. It became a fully commercialized industry, and in some areas there were more marijuana dispensaries than Starbucks and McDonald's combined. In Colorado and other states, tax revenues have remained at a small fraction of total budgets.

Hawai'i is already struggling to manage existing challenges in healthcare, education, public safety, housing, homelessness and environmental protection, and those pressures are growing by the day. In legalized states, the revenues from marijuana are minimal compared to the increased challenges and added costs. Hawai'i cannot afford another addiction-for-profit industry.

Share this report. Call or email your legislator. Urge them to vote NO to legalizing recreational use marijuana.

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