

MYTH 7

If I buy marijuana, I'm not hurting anyone else.

Think again. Despite its reputation as the herb of peace and love—and despite claims that smoking pot is a victimless crime—marijuana and violence go hand in hand. Marijuana trafficking is a big, violent business, whether the plants are grown on foreign soil or cultivated in basements, backyards, and farms in the United States.⁵⁰

VIOLENCE AT HOME

The trade in domestically grown marijuana often turns violent when dealers have conflicts or when growers feel their crops are threatened. But drug criminals are not the only ones threatened by the violence of the marijuana trade.

Much of the marijuana produced in America is grown on public lands, including our national forests and parks—areas set aside to

preserve wildlife habitats, provide playgrounds for our children, and serve as natural refuges for recreation.⁵¹

Traffickers grow their crops in these areas because the land is free and accessible, crop ownership is hard to document, and because growers are

immune to asset forfeiture laws. Law enforcement officials report that many marijuana growers, seeking to protect their crops from busybodies and rival “pot pirates,” surround their plots with crude booby traps, including fishhooks dangling at eye level, bear traps, punji sticks, and rat traps rigged with shotgun shells.⁵²

Most of the marijuana on America’s public lands is grown in the vast national forests of California, where more than 540,000 plants

Even supporters of the legalization and medical marijuana movements agree that kids should not be using the drug.⁸³

were seized or eradicated on land managed by the U.S. Forest Service in 2003 alone. This figure does not include the 309,000 marijuana plants taken from Forest Service land in other states,⁵³ nor does it take into account the hundreds of thousands of plants removed from land managed by other government agencies. For example, in 2003 more than 134,000 marijuana plants were seized or eradicated from areas in California administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management.⁵⁴

According to officers with the Forest Service and other agencies, many of California's illegal marijuana fields are controlled not by peace-loving flower children but by employees of Mexican drug-trafficking organizations carrying high-powered assault weapons. During the growing season, the officers say, the cartels smuggle hundreds of undocumented Mexican nationals into the U.S. to work the fields, bringing with them pesticides, equipment, and guns. Hunters, campers, and others have been threatened at gunpoint or fired upon after stumbling into these illegal gardens.⁵⁵

A DANGEROUS IMPORT

It is commonly believed that most marijuana smoked in the United States is also grown in this country. In truth, smuggled marijuana—whether brought in from Mexico, other Latin America source areas, or from Canada—accounts for most of the pot available in America.⁵⁶

Drug traffickers often use violence in the effort to get their product to the U.S. market. Criminal groups operating from Mexico, many of them linked to torture, executions, and other acts of violence, have transported and distributed thousands of tons of marijuana and other drugs throughout the United States since the 1970s.⁵⁷

While some would argue that problems such as these would be solved by simply legalizing marijuana, it's important to remember that the drug is illegal because it causes harm—physical, social, behavioral, and academic—especially to young users. Even most people who support legalization agree that kids should not be using marijuana.⁵⁸

MARIJUANA HURTS FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Marijuana harms more than just those who use the drug. It also hurts the babies born to users. It hurts teen users who betray the trust of their parents, and it hurts the parents who are confused and dismayed by their kids' use.

Marijuana also hurts communities when users commit crimes or cause crashes on the highway. A roadside study of reckless drivers in Tennessee found that 33 percent of all subjects who were not under the influence of alcohol, and who were tested for drugs at the scene of their arrest, tested positive for marijuana.⁵⁹ In a 2003 Canadian study, one in five students admitted to driving within an hour of using marijuana.⁶⁰

Marijuana also harms society by causing lost productivity in business, limiting educational attainment, and by contributing to illnesses and injuries that put further strain on the health care system.