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Research Brief

Crime Reduction and Marijuana Legalization: The Experience of the American West

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How have legalization changes reduced charges, arrests and imprisonments?

West Bend is a typical small city in Colorado. Long before Amendment 64 in 2012 affected the rest of the state, West Bend had very progressive local marijuana laws. Since the late 1980s, West Bend has had some of the most striking drug laws in the U.S.

West Bend made the possession of small amounts of marijuana a misdemeanor, on par with a traffic ticket. Since then, surveys have shown that the people of West Bend are largely satisfied with the laws there. There is no evidence that the people of West Bend produce more marijuana than in other places in Colorado, that they consume more, or that there are more marijuana transactions taking place between residents than anywhere else in the state.

There are far fewer arrests and imprisonments of residents on drug charges than in neighboring cities, and the crime rate is lower in West Bend today than it was in the 1970s. Furthermore, prior to Amendment 64, West Bend's crime rates were lower than most of the other cities of similar size in the state.

The research supporting these findings was conducted by researchers from the three largest universities in Colorado. The publications have been reviewed by scholars from other Rocky Mountain region universities (full disclosure: including the University of Southeastern Utah).

Similar experiences are expected throughout Colorado and Washington state now that more liberal marijuana laws have been passed there. Evidence from West Bend indicates that Colorado and Washington can expect lower rates of arrests, lower rates of incarceration, and lower rates of crime.

George Smallson, one of the early proponents of West Bend's progressive policies, says that research shows that as marijuana use becomes socially acceptable, stigmas associated with its use disappear and the social pressures to treat users as criminals disappear. As these changes take place, more and more people find the use of marijuana to be non-controversial. Over time, social, recreational use of marijuana becomes as uninteresting as the social, recreational use of alcohol or caffeine.

While not exactly a trick document, this one is designed to push the students in a certain direction. They are likely to find this supportive of Franklin's position, if not his arguments.

The suggestion is the West Bend and Midland are sufficiently similar that information about West Bend's experience will be relevant to Midland's future.

That West Bend's crime rate is lower now than it was in the 70s isn't necessarily relevant, the same may be true for Midland, and, the reasons for the drop may have nothing to do with the drug laws.

Colorado and Washington may be sufficiently different from Midland in terms of government or population that the experiences of the other states won't be relevant.

All of that said, there might be relevant similarities and students should pick up on both this and the previous facts. I am curious to see how they respond.