

Cannabis Legalization and Its Impact on Public Health: A Path to Safer, Regulated Consumption

Writer: Skylar Gerena

Editor: Simmi Purohit

I. Introduction

Debate regarding the legalization of cannabis has grown in popularity in recent years, as various nations and U.S. states are adopting laws regulating the production, exchange, and usage of cannabis. Despite concerns about public safety, there is growing evidence that legalization under rigorous regulations provides a safer option for cannabis consumers than the untamed marketplace. In the 2024 election cycle, Florida, North Dakota, and South Dakota all had ballot measures to legalize recreational marijuana, but none passed.¹ A growing number of states are considering legalizing marijuana due to its potential benefits for society and the economy. Cannabis should be legalized on the federal level in the U.S. to promote increased public health and safety for consumers by enhancing quality control, reducing the risks associated with polluted products, and employing harm reduction measures.

II. Improved Quality Control

The enforcement of strict quality control strategies represents one of the greatest benefits associated with legalizing cannabis. Unregulated cannabis products typically contain harmful contaminants such as chemicals and toxic metals.² According to an Environmental Health Perspectives research report, up to eighty percent of cannabis products from unregulated marketplaces tested positive for dangerous levels of chemicals such as tar, carbon monoxide, and

¹ Brett M. Schuman et al., *Cannabis on The Ballot—2024 Brings Disappointing Results*, Goodwin L. (Nov. 2024), goodwinlaw.com/en/insights/publications/2024/11/alerts-practices-can-cannabis-on-the-ballot.

² Nate Seltenerich, *Untested, Unsafe? Cannabis Users Show Higher Lead and Cadmium Levels*, 131 Enviro. Health Perspec. 1 (2023).

pesticides.³ By contrast, legalized marketplaces require extensive inspection processes to ensure that products satisfy safety demands before reaching the hands of consumers. To provide consumers with a more secure and reliable experience, Colorado, for example, requires that cannabis products undergo laboratory testing to confirm strength and inspect for contaminants.⁴ Regulated marketplaces must undergo mandated potency testing on all retail cannabis goods, including flowers, concentrates, and edibles. By confirming the concentrations of cannabinoids like THC and CBD, consumers have access to precise details regarding the potency of the product, which gives them control over the dosage and consistency when using the product. These products are also examined for contaminants such as metals, chemicals, and harmful substances including mold, salmonella, E. coli, and fungi. For instance, Colorado requires cannabis goods to have less than 10,000 colony-forming units (CFU) of total yeast and mold, and less than one colony-forming unit of E. coli and salmonella.⁵ If a sample does not pass inspection and tests positive for having large amounts of CFUs, the entire batch is deemed as “faulty” and is not allowed to be retested.⁶ Instead, a new sample must be provided for reinspection within thirty days.⁷ This process helps guarantee the safety of the consumer and promises that the product is correctly advertised.

III. Reduced Health Hazards from Polluted Items

The lack of protection in the unregulated market poses the threat of people being exposed to hazardous substances, such as synthetic cannabinoids, which have been associated with serious and long-term health issues.⁸ Typically advertised as “K2” or “spice,” these substances

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Boomtown Dev. Co., *Update on Colorado State Cannabis Testing Regulations*, Chem Service, Inc. (Nov. 2021), chemservice.com/news/colorado-state-cannabis-testing-regulations/?srsltid=AfmBOoqwF6bb3_7_mkb_U5MLqZPg gR433Rz8WuaWBwWHu3_hbdz1vTqO.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Nat'l Inst. Drug Abuse, *Synthetic Cannabinoids* (Oct. 2023), nida.nih.gov/research-topics/synthetic-cannabinoids.

are labeled under memorable and unique names, which tends to entice consumers to try the drugs. Synthetic cannabinoids are artificial substances that mimic the psychoactive properties of THC, which is the main component of cannabis.⁹ These substances have been associated with serious adverse effects, such as psychosis, kidney damage, seizures, and even the possibility of death.¹⁰ In 2011, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), approximately 28,500 emergency room visits in the U.S. were linked to synthetic cannabis.¹¹ The erratic nature and potential depth of these health risks highlight the importance of regulation and public awareness in minimizing the risks linked to the use of these fake and, often, falsely advertised drugs.¹² The legalization of cannabis addresses this issue through maintaining a controlled environment free of toxic contaminants, like these synthetic cannabinoids, in products. Additionally, consumers receive information regarding THC and CBD concentrations via clear labeling in regulated marketplaces, facilitating ethical and educated use.

IV. Strategies to Reduce Harm

Legalization provides an opportunity to ease the stigma of medical cannabis, allowing people to receive treatment for conditions such as seizures and muscle pain without the fear of facing legal repercussions for doing so. Public health initiatives in Canada, where cannabis was legalized nationally in 2018, place an extreme value on secure consumption practices.¹³ The government of Canada implemented major public education programs to spread awareness to the public on the dangers of cannabis consumption with a particular focus on misuse and driving

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Alcohol & Drug Found., *Synthetic Cannabinoids* (Mar. 2025), adf.org.au/drug-facts/synthetic-cannabinoids.

¹¹ Donna M. Bush & David A. Woodwell, *Update: Drug-Related Emergency Department Visits Involving Synthetic Cannabinoids*, Sub. Abuse & Mental Health Serv.s Admin. (Oct. 2014), [samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/Update%20Drug-Related%20Emergency%20Department%20Visits%20Involving%20Synthetic%20Cannabinoids.htm](http://samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/Update%20Drug-Related%20Emergency%20Department%20Visits%20Involving%20Synthetic%20Cannabinoids/Update%20Drug-Related%20Emergency%20Department%20Visits%20Involving%20Synthetic%20Cannabinoids.htm).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Health Can., *Cannabis Public Education Activities*, Gov. Can. (Aug. 2018), canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2018/06/cannabis-public-education-activities.html.

while impaired.¹⁴ The “Don’t Drive High” campaign raised awareness of the dangers of driving while high through the utilization of a range of media platforms.¹⁵ The campaign by Public Safety Canada received over seven thousand visitors to its website, over seven thousand exposures via a trial experiential marketing engagement, and two digital audio advertisements that reached over 1.8 million people in 2023.¹⁶ These campaigns strive to promote ethical cannabis consumption and highlight the importance of keeping children away from cannabis.¹⁷

V. Conclusion

A more secure and controlled solution to unregulated markets is presented by the legalization of cannabis when combined with strong laws and regulations. Regulated marketplaces reduce the risks associated with synthetic cannabinoids and rigorous testing regulations, such as those in Colorado, promise a safe product. Likewise, harm reduction campaigns and tactics, such as Canada’s “Don’t Drive High” initiative, highlight how public awareness may assist in minimizing potential risks to health. It is vital to consider that a tightly controlled market puts a high value on consumer safety and public health through evidence-based efforts, particularly as more regions consider modifying their cannabis laws. A cautious and wise approach to cannabis legalization will be contingent on constant investments in harm reduction, awareness, and control.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Pub. Safety Can., 2023 Annual National Data Report to Inform Trends and Patterns in Drug-Impaired Driving (June 2024), publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcts/pblctns/2023-did-fad/index-en.aspx.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Health Can., *supra* note 13.