

Advocates for Better Health (ABH) supports the immediate decriminalization of cannabis use and possession in Minnesota. Decriminalizing cannabis is a health equity and public health issue, and directly relates to institutional racism and police violence.

Criminal charges and incarceration relating to cannabis use and possession disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and people of color, (BIPOC) Americans compared to white Americans, though cannabis use rates are similar across racial groups. In 2014, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 49% of white Americans reported using cannabis at least once, compared to 42% of Blacks and 32% of Latinos. Despite this, Black Minnesotans are more than **five times as likely** to be criminally charged or incarcerated due to cannabis. Two-thirds of all people incarcerated on drug charges in state-run prisons are people of color.

“The War on Drugs” is a government initiative and widely known phrase in the United States, first popularized in 1971 after a press conference in which President Richard Nixon declared that drug use was “public enemy number one.” Policies targeting drug use were written into law, and have had devastating consequences on Americans of color, particularly Black Americans. At the height of the War on Drugs, in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Blacks were 13 times as likely to be arrested for drug use while constituting only 13% of drug users in the United States—a huge disparity.

This clear over-policing and incarceration of Black and other Americans of color has many public health consequences, including trapping people in a cycle of poverty due to difficulty finding living-wage jobs and stable housing because of past convictions. Over-policing and incarceration impacts entire families across generations. Since the start of the War on Drugs in the 1980s, the rate of children with incarcerated mothers has increased 100%, and the rate of those with incarcerated fathers has increased 75%.¹ Parental incarceration impacts child development and often permanently changes families in ways that cannot be undone.

Decriminalizing cannabis possession and use, and the automatic expungement criminal records of Minnesotans with cannabis-related convictions is a necessary step in decreasing institutional racism and the over-policing of people of color. With the disproportionately high number of cannabis arrests of Black Minnesotans follows convictions that may result in incarceration. These cannabis-related convictions cause irreparable harm to communities of color, disrupting families, careers, education, and more. Automatically expunging² cannabis-related convictions is a step towards reducing some of the harms caused to Black Minnesotans and other people of color.

Additionally, the recently passed Minnesota law legalizing the sale of some THC edibles has created an even more unjust system, one where some people will continue to be incarcerated for possessing certain forms of cannabis, such as flower, while others are allowed to legally possess and sell it. This paradox will continue to disproportionately harm BIPOC communities.

Decriminalizing cannabis will reduce police interactions with BIPOC Minnesotans, reduce arrests and incarcerations for drug offenses, and will positively impact not only individuals, but their families and communities. ABH does not have a position on the legalization and use of

¹ Eric Martin, "Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children," March 1, 2017, [nij.ojp.gov: https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/hidden-consequences-impact-incarceration-dependent-children](https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/hidden-consequences-impact-incarceration-dependent-children)

² Destroying/sealing a conviction as if it never occurred

recreational cannabis; more research is needed and is underway. Our focus is on the public health aspects of decriminalization and expungement. Therefore, ABH urges the expeditious adoption of a policy at the statewide and federal levels that decriminalizes cannabis and automatically expunges the records of people with cannabis-related possession and/or use convictions.

This work is a part of ABH's education and advocacy efforts to advance community-driven public health.

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