

Legalize It

In 2000, George Bierson's "Marijuana, the Deceptive Drug", was published by the Massachusetts News. Bierson concludes that marijuana is harmful in many ways, including brain damage, damage to the reproductive system, and weakening of the immune system. He also attempts to convince the reader that marijuana is a "gateway drug" that leads the users to venture into much harder drugs. I believe that research to support anything can be found if one is looking hard enough, but that the fallacy of Bierson's conclusion is due to his research seeking facts to support an already-assumed conclusion. Based on my research and my own personal experience, I have found that several of his points, when looked at logically, do not reach his conclusion.

One of Bierson's strongest supporting claims is of the physical harms of marijuana. He argues that Heath's tests of the monkey's brain seemed to show conclusive evidence of brain damage; however, he fails to mention that the tests were later discredited: the monkeys were given extremely high doses, doses exponentially higher than that of the average recreational or medical marijuana user, and the test's sample size was too small. More current studies of people who are heavy marijuana smokers show no evidence of brain damage; in addition, the American Medical Association has officially endorsed the decriminalization of marijuana. I find this to be quite a bit more compelling than an outdated and poorly executed test. His claims of damage to both the reproductive system and the immune system are again based on invalid experiments of nearly lethal doses administered to mice and other animals, not humans. Moreover, several studies of the effects of marijuana on the human reproductive and immune systems have failed to demonstrate adverse effects.

One of the longest standing arguments against the use of marijuana is that it gives users a "gateway" to harder or more illicit drug use. Bierson states in his article that "Marijuana is the seed from which the scourge of drug abuse grows. If we stop the marijuana, we will stop the rest of drug abuse". I have several issues with this statement: first, the simple fact that many heroin and cocaine users used marijuana first does not conclude that the latter is the result of the first. Correlation is not causality. Bierson's vehement argument against marijuana alone become suspect, as most of these heroin and cocaine abusers had also previously used alcohol and tobacco. According to government surveys, a conservative estimate of 80 million American has tried marijuana in their life, and 20 million admit to using it recently; if marijuana were truly a gateway drug, we would see a higher percentage of regular users. Instead we are seeing an even smaller percentage of abusers of cocaine or heroin. In fact, most people who use marijuana most often quit on their own before the age of 34. If anybody is still compelled to buy into the "gateway" theory, a real-life example is available for all to see: In Holland, marijuana has been partially decriminalized since the 1970's. Reports show that the use of cocaine and heroin has significantly decreased, thus contradicting the hypothesis of marijuana as a gateway drug. Instead, these statistics appear to point to the conclusion that marijuana is more likely a substitute for harder drugs rather than a launching pad.

While I do feel that Bierson has failed to present conclusive evidence of the harmfulness of marijuana through the points made, it is not a proper statement to claim that marijuana is "harmless" either. Even though the properties of marijuana have shown not to be physically addictive, one can become psychologically addicted. However, this is true of just about anything that can give one pleasure, such as chocolate, gambling, or shopping. No substance will be safe for everybody, under all circumstances, or when used in excessive amounts. For example, over-the-counter medications can be deadly for those

who are allergic or who overdose. On the other hand, marijuana overdose has never been a sole reported cause of death: the amount of cannabinoids required to have a lethal effect are more than 40,000 times the necessary dosage for intoxication, making it highly unlikely that a person would be able to or could be able to achieve such a concentrated amount in their bloodstream. This is a severe contrast to alcohol, where one can very easily bring about one's demise, and at only a mere four times the legal limit.

Marijuana continues to be a relevant controversial issue in society today, as many states included decriminalization and legalization proposals on their ballots. It can be very difficult to know which side to support, partially due to the media propaganda, some of which even contradicts itself in its fervor. This is likely the result of many wealthy and influential organizations that have a financial interest in this issue, from the pharmaceutical companies who stand to lose profits from legalization, the governments who stands to gain from taxation, or the "dealers" who will be put out of business with the elimination of the black market. It seems that those with a vested interest in the legalization or continued criminalization of marijuana will pull whatever strings necessary to sway public opinion to their side. This may include creating, supporting, or merely citing biased or invalid research to support the desired conclusion, just as Bierson has done in his article.