

STATES EASING MARIJUANA LAWS

Police Also Found to Reduce Enforcement of Stringent Penalties on Possession

By United Press International

Call it pot, grass, ganja or Mary Jane, marijuana is still marijuana. And more than a decade after being discovered by the middle class, it appears to have gained a wide acceptance, even though it is still illegal.

As a police spokesman in Washington put it: "There is no campaign to make arrests. Every Joe Blow we arrest these days has marijuana in his pockets."

A recent survey found these developments in the use of marijuana and the enforcement of laws forbidding it:

¶ At least a dozen states or localities have made possession of marijuana a misdemeanor instead of a felony, or are planning to do so.

¶ Penalties for sellers of marijuana, as well as for possession of hard drugs, remain stiff.

¶ Smoking marijuana has become socially acceptable to so many people that it's no longer considered particularly "chic."

¶ With peer pressure to smoke marijuana diminishing, growing numbers of young people are turning back to alcohol, which is both cheaper and legal.

Legal Changes

Perhaps the greatest changes have been in the legal area. In Oregon, for example, possession of less than an ounce of marijuana is treated as a violation rather than a crime and suspects get a ticket, as they would for a parking offense. The maximum penalty for possession is a \$100 fine. That compares with up to a year in jail and a \$1,000 fine before Oct. 5, 1973.

The police in the state, who worried about the impact the changes in the law would have now say it has produced no special problems.

Earlier this year, voters in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, Mich., approved local ordinances cutting penalties for possession and use of marijuana to \$5.

Alabama law makes possession of marijuana for personal use a misdemeanor with the records wiped clean after 12 months if there is no second conviction.

In Los Angeles County, a new section of the penal code leaves to the discretion of judges the question of prosecuting certain narcotics-related crimes.

Perhaps the most active nationwide lobbyist for easing marijuana laws is the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, which is based in Washington and financed primarily by the Playboy Foundation.

R. Keith Stroup, executive director of the lobby, says he expects no major action on either the Federal or state levels before the November elections. But he thinks less restrictive laws pending in Massachusetts, Vermont and Minnesota have a chance of passing in 1975, and he predicts progress, but not immediate victory, in New York, California and Michigan.

Three decriminalization bills are before Congress, one of which would apply only to the District of Columbia. Senator Harold Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, chairman of the Alcoholism and Narcotics subcommittee of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee, says he doesn't expect any breakthroughs, but has promised two days of hearings in July.

Casual Law Enforcement

The most recent and reliable figures on the number of people who have used marijuana come from President Nixon's National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, which reported to Mr. Nixon and the Congress in March, 1973.

According to the commission, 15 per cent of all adults in 1971 had tried the drug at least once. In 1972, the figure was 16 per cent. The figure for youths 12 to 17 years old was 14 per cent both years.

Lighter laws on marijuana possession have been endorsed by many organizations, including the President's commission—although Mr. Nixon disavowed the recommendation—the American Bar Association, the American Public Health Association and the National Education Association.

Amid the efforts to liberalize the laws, there is evidence that law enforcement officers have become less concerned about enforcing present ones.

"We should devote our time and resources to apprehending and convicting burglars, rapists, murderers, hard drug pushers and the like, not incidental and casual users of marijuana," an Oregon District Attorney said.

Archie Rippetto, a police lieutenant who coordinates narcotics investigations in St. Louis and five surrounding counties, was asked whether police ignored marijuana smokers at events such as rock concerts. "Obviously," he said. "Our efforts are directed at those people responsible for the distribution as opposed to the personal use."

"The public seems to be complacent," said a Federal law enforcement officer in Miami, who asked not to be identified. "You don't see anybody demanding strong enforcement," he said.

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