1 in 8 People, Aged 21-25, Admit Driving While on Marijuana. We Need a Public Health Campaign Against It.

By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 2, 2020

As a society, we have done a good job stigmatizing the completely unacceptable behavior of driving under the influence of alcohol. But because marijuana has been destigmatized, people are driving while high. It's time to take action.

When I was a kid, there were massive public health campaigns against smoking, drugs, and drunk driving. I specifically remember seeing a poster in my elementary school depicting some ugly dude smoking with the sarcastic caption, "Smoking is very glamorous."

Drugs got the same treatment. A particularly memorable TV commercial (perhaps because it was so badly acted and overly dramatized) depicted a father demanding to know from his son, "Who taught you how to do this stuff?" In an epic turn of events, the son shouts back, "You, alright? I learned it by watching you!"

Likewise, drunk driving was targeted with the motto, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

Each of these campaigns met with varying degrees of success. Today, the consensus seems to be that the "war on drugs" was a major failure. However, the public health campaigns (in combination with other things
such as new laws) against smoking cigarettes and driving while intoxicated seemed to have worked. For instance, HHS reports that in 1976, nearly 30% of 12th graders reported smoking daily. In 2018, the prevalence was down to 3.6%. Similarly, drunk driving fatalities are way down since the 1980’s.

We Need a Public Health Campaign Against Marijuana

Now, the CDC reports data that we certainly should consider troubling: 1 in 8 people aged 21-25 have reported driving while high on marijuana within the past year.

![Figure: Percentage of all persons aged >=16 years who reported driving a vehicle under the influence of marijuana or illicit drugs other than marijuana in the past year, by age group. — National Survey on Drug Use and Health, United States, 2018]

Overall, 4.7% of Americans aged 16+ admitted to driving while high on marijuana in the past year. By comparison, a 2012 study by the CDC found that 1.8% of Americans admitted to driving drunk in the previous 30 days. (Obviously, those figures aren't entirely comparable, but we analyze the data we've got.)

How is that drunk driving is stigmatized but driving while high is not? It's probably because we have destigmatized marijuana in general. Not to pick on anyone in particular, but our society's attitude toward the drug was summed up by President Barack Obama when he said, "I don't think (marijuana) is more dangerous than alcohol."

While almost certainly true, I wrote for USA Today at the time that what he said was ill-advised because it contributed further to the destigmatization of pot. In other words, most people seem to think that pot isn't a big deal. As a result, it must not be a big deal to drive after puffing the magic dragon.
But it is, especially since marijuana is stronger now than it was 20 years ago [9]. Public health groups would be wise to launch a national campaign about the dangers of marijuana [10]. It's bad for your lungs, has psychological effects, and absolutely should never be used while driving.


Source URL: https://www.acsh.org/news/2020/01/02/1-8-people-aged-21-25-admit-driving-while-marijuana-we-need-public-health-campaign-against-it-14484

Links
[2] https://img0.etsystatic.com/039/0/9830773/il_570xN.660558468_ibo0.jpg
[4] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4843a2.htm
[7] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6430a2.htm
[11] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6850a1.htm