



## Marijuana and Massachusetts: What's Ahead This Year



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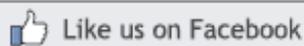
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At the federal level, recreational marijuana possession is illegal. However, in 2016, voters in California and Massachusetts, alongside those in six other states, chose to legalize marijuana for recreational use, with the new laws going into effect this year.

Two of our team members, FCD undergraduate intern Caroline Jens, and FCD prevention specialist Mike Connolly, have compiled some basic information about the changes to come, as well as their health-based perspectives about these changes.

*Caroline, what's new in your home state of California and in Massachusetts, where you attend college?*

In both states, legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes is taking place in 2018. But, also in both states, legalization comes with restrictions. For instance, both states set an age-of-use restriction to individuals aged 21 and over. Both states' new laws also limit the legal quantity of marijuana an individual can possess for recreational purposes, and where cannabis can be smoked or ingested. Further, both states will enforce various dispensary regulations and penalties.

*And in California, particularly, what's changing?*

In California, all recreational marijuana sales can be licensed starting this month. In January, temporary licenses will allow old and new businesses alike to serve customers while working to meet particular requirements for a full license. Requirements for a full license include the installation of 24-hour surveillance systems for sales sites and proper labeling of products.

*What about Massachusetts?*

In the year ahead, the Massachusetts legalization process will follow a slightly longer timeline for new businesses. While priority licenses are already being given to current marijuana establishments, new businesses will have to wait to apply for recreational marijuana sales licensure until July 2018.

*What happens, from a legal perspective, if someone underage uses marijuana in California or Massachusetts now?*

In both states, according to the new law, individuals under 21 found using or in possession of cannabis are not criminalized. Those under the age of 18 who are found using must attend drug education or counseling and perform community service. The violation of the law will be removed from their legal record when they turn 18. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 21 who are found using must pay a fine of up to \$100 for their violation of the law.

In Massachusetts, adult penalties are completely decriminalized. Individuals over the age of 21 who violate the law also pay a fine. In California, the same violation can result in a fine or jail time, capped at a few days to reduce the state's prison population.

*As a college student and a California native, what do you think about all of this?*

With legalization, cannabis distributors will follow specific concentrate and ingredient regulations. Previously, dealers could cut marijuana with other substances, and the buyer would not be informed of exactly what he or she was ingesting.

Clearly labeled products will provide consumers with an assurance of what they are ingesting. I do feel less anxious about my friends of age who choose to use marijuana. Now they can know more about what they are putting into their bodies.

*Mike, you are a father of two, a resident of Colorado, and former community coalition director in Aspen. What's your perspective on the changes taking place in California and Massachusetts?*

My sense is that we may be approaching nationwide legalization. That said, I think several considerations are necessary for us to take at this time.

The first is that it's important for people to recognize the difference between legalization and decriminalization. They are not the same thing. I know people who voted for legalization, because they didn't think people should be in jail for marijuana offenses. Yet, some of those same people in Colorado are now not happy with the proliferation of pot shops here.

The second consideration is that Colorado's Governor Hickenlooper urged other states to hold off on legalization until our state had navigated its intricacies. It felt to me that we in Colorado put the cart before the horse, legalizing recreational use before we had figured out how best to implement effective prevention programs or to navigate competing laws at the local, state, and federal level. There are a lot of in-between steps to legalization that are potentially problematic if they are not addressed from the start.

*What lessons can Massachusetts and California learn from Colorado?*

One of the first and biggest complaints about legalization in Colorado was that marijuana edibles were indistinguishable from non-THC infused products. To sell cannabis products, manufacturers sprayed regular candies with a THC solution. Mistaken as regular sweets, unsuspecting children and adults consumed gummy bears and candy bars containing multiple "servings" of THC. Massachusetts and California could avoid some of these problems by requiring all THC-containing products to be distinctly labeled and identifiable.

Another issue is the potential emergence of illegal marijuana sales. Colorado law permitted an unrealistically high allowance of plants for persons growing for personal consumption. Some say this facet of the law has inadvertently led to an increase in illegal marijuana sales post legalization. Large illegal grow operations have been discovered in wilderness areas. Authorities believe that illegal growers feel that they are less likely to be penalized in a state that has legalized marijuana.

Further, legalizing states will likely be seen as marijuana exporters to neighboring states. Much like states that had lower drinking ages in the past, people from neighboring states come into Colorado to buy legal cannabis.

Finally, marijuana use in Colorado has become normalized in many places. While public consumption is not allowed, it is not uncommon to see people smoking while walking through town. Legalization is changing attitudes here, and it may do the same elsewhere.

*How can adults help teens and younger adults under the age of 21 navigate what the new laws mean for them, from a health perspective?*

I think the best thing we can do for young people during

changing times is to highlight the fact that, despite what many people say, there are risks associated with marijuana use. This is especially true when introducing THC to the still-developing brain. Non-use, by contrast, is a healthy, normal option for teens and young adults to choose. We can actively support and encourage non-use to keep our kids healthy.

I attended The National Cannabis Summit in Denver last fall. There were some excellent workshops there that represented a broad spectrum of views on the legalization of recreational use. One point that all of the presenters agreed upon was that the risks associated with use by young people are very real and well documented. These presenters and I recognize how important it is that adults in states with legalization do their best to educate the public about the increased risks to teens and young adults.

Here are some points to further consider:

- THC levels in marijuana products for sale can be unprecedented, making it close to impossible for scientists to study the true effects of current marijuana use on the teen brain and body. Long-term, reliable studies will inevitably lag behind new trends in use.
- Dr. Susan Weiss of NIDA, featured speaker at The Cannabis Summit has said, "The two currently legal drugs [nicotine and alcohol] are the most costly to society because they are available, not because they are the most dangerous." The same might be said for marijuana over time.
- As an organization, FCD Prevention Works is an avid proponent of the evidence-based social norms approach to substance abuse prevention. In Colorado, we have seen the perceptions of marijuana use risk go down among teens. The social norms approach warns us that a drop in youth risk perception often comes before an increase in actual youth use.

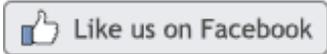
In order to keep our healthy kids healthy, it's essential for adults to keep all lines of communication open and to talk about alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs early and often.

## Contributors

**Caroline Jens** is an FCD Prevention Works undergraduate intern studying at Boston University. A native of California, at BU Caroline is now a Red Cross Blood Drive Ambassador, a Health Science major, a Computer Science minor, and a Kilachand Honors College student.

In addition to his role as an FCD prevention specialist, held since 2010, **Mike Connolly** is a Senior Managing Director of East Coast Asset Management, a wealth management firm. He is the former Executive Director of Valley Partnership for Drug Prevention in Aspen, Colorado. Mike is the father of two young boys and a competitive cyclist and

avid skier.



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