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Marijuana is drug most often linked to crime, study finds

By Rob Hotakainen-McClatchy Washington Bureau updated May 23, 2013 5:20 PM

Marijuana is the drug most often linked to crime in the United States, the U.S. drug czar said Thursday, dismissing calls for legalization as a bumper-sticker approach that should be avoided.

Gil Kerlikowske, the White House Director of National Drug-Control Policy, said a study by his office showed a strong link between drug use and crime. Eighty percent of the adult males arrested for crimes in Sacramento, California, last year tested positive for at least one illegal drug. Marijuana was the most commonly detected drug, found in 54 percent of those arrested.

The study found similar results in four other cities: New York, Denver, Atlanta, and Chicago. Among the cities, it included examinations of 1,736 urine samples and 1,939 interviews with men who were arrested.

Researchers found that marijuana was the most popular drug used by men who'd been arrested in all the cities, ranging from a low of 37 percent in Atlanta to a high of 58 percent in Chicago. Chicago also had the highest overall positive test results, with 86 percent of the men found to have at least one drug in their bloodstreams.

Cocaine ranked as the second most commonly found drug in all the cities with the exception of Sacramento where methamphetamine was No. 2, detected among 40 percent of those arrested.

Saying that drugs are fueling much of the crime in the United States, Kerlikowske used the study to make a pitch for more treatment.

He said that while more than 60 percent of those arrested in the study had tested positive for at least one drug, 70 percent of the arrestees had never received any drug or alcohol treatment. As a result, he said, U.S. drug policy should be approached from a public health standpoint, not merely as a criminal justice issue.

“That means addressing those factors that contribute to drug offenses, factors that all too often include the disease of addiction,” Kerlikowske said in a speech at the Urban Institute, a public policy research center in Washington. “It means abandoning simplistic bumper-sticker approaches, such as boiling the issue down to a “war on drugs’ or outright legalization.”

Nancy La Vigne, the Director of the Justice Policy Center for the Urban Institute, said in a statement that the high rates of drug use among those studied showed the need to back more prevention and treatment to “address the root cause of criminal involvement, and not just the symptoms.

Backers of the growing movement to legalize marijuana were quick to criticize the study.

“The drug czar should be ashamed of himself for attempting to deceive the American people in this manner,” said Steve Fox, the National Political Director for the Marijuana Policy Project, a pro-legalization group in Washington. “We could release a study tomorrow showing that 98 percent of arrestees in the United States drank water in the 48 hours before they engaged in criminal behavior. Does that mean that water causes crime? Fortunately, the American people are smarter than the drug czar thinks they are.”

Kerlikowske, a former Seattle police chief, has consistently opposed legalization since he became President Barack Obama’s top drug policy advisor in 2009.

His position put him at odds with two states, Washington and Colorado, that voted in November to legalize marijuana, a controlled substance that remains illegal under federal law. With the Obama administration doing nothing so far to try to stop them, both states are proceeding with plans to begin selling marijuana for recreational use next year.

A third state, Alaska, might follow soon, with legalization supporters aiming to get the measure on the state’s primary ballot in August of next year.

Fox, who is expecting California and other states to vote on legalizing marijuana in 2016, said the nation’s outdated marijuana laws were turning otherwise law-abiding citizens into criminals. He had a suggestion for the drug czar: “If he wants to reduce crime in the U.S., he should join us in making marijuana legal.”

In his speech, Kerlikowske said it was time for the United States to “acknowledge and come to grips with the link between crime and substance use” and ease the burden on its criminal justice system. In 2011, he said, the country had 2.4 million people incarcerated, for the highest incarceration rate in the world: 716 people per 100,000 citizens.

Kerlikowske said that Obama’s health-care plan, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which Congress passed in 2010, would be revolutionary for the drug policy field because for the first time it made treatment for substance-use disorders a required health benefit.

He said drug addiction “is not a moral failing, but a brain disease that can be prevented, treated, and from which people can recover.”

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