



Treatment for Marijuana Problems: Separating Fact From Fiction

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I've heard that over a quarter of a million Americans seek treatment every year for marijuana abuse or dependence, and those numbers are rising. Is that a sign that marijuana is dangerously addictive?

While it is true that just over one quarter of a million Americans received treatment for marijuana problems in 2007, most of them did *not* seek treatment. A majority — 57% — were *forced* into treatment by the criminal justice system. They were arrested, offered treatment instead of jail, and naturally chose treatment. There is no reason to believe that most of these people were addicted, or that they had a problem other than getting caught with a forbidden substance. By contrast, only 28% of crack cocaine admissions and 14% of heroin admissions came from the criminal justice system. We arrest people for marijuana, force many of them into treatment programs that they don't need, and then officials use those treatment admissions as "proof" that marijuana must be addictive.

Still, that seems like a lot of people in treatment for marijuana.

Not when you consider how widely used marijuana is. According to federal government statistics, of Americans who used illegal drugs in the past month, over three quarters used marijuana – yet marijuana represents less than 16% of treatment admissions. What these figures really show is how rare serious problems with marijuana are, given the huge number of users.

What about teens? I've heard that more adolescents are in treatment for marijuana than for all other illegal drugs combined.

Again, the majority were sent to treatment as a result of being arrested – a higher percentage than for alcohol or any other illicit drug. And government statistics show that the increase in juvenile admissions for marijuana treatment was driven by criminal justice referrals. There is no evidence for a rise in actual marijuana dependence.

Is there other evidence that people in marijuana treatment are less likely to be addicted than those in treatment for other drugs?

Yes. Admission to a residential program (as opposed to outpatient treatment) is a sign of a more serious problem, and only 14.5% of marijuana treatment admissions are residential – far less than for most other drugs. Admission to detoxification indicates a severe problem, and people in alcohol treatment are 14 times more likely to be sent to detox than those in marijuana treatment. People in marijuana treatment are also more likely to be employed than are those in treatment for any other illegal drug. This is especially remarkable when you consider that 42% of those in marijuana treatment are aged 19 or under, and thus less likely to be working than adults. By comparison, people under 19 make up only 6% of those in treatment for methamphetamine, 9% for tranquilizers, and 3% for heroin.

But government officials regularly say that marijuana is addictive. Is it?

In its 1999 report, commissioned by the White House, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) stated, "Compared to most other drugs ... dependence among marijuana users is relatively rare." The IOM noted that while some marijuana users do become dependent, "they appear less likely to do so than users of other drugs (including alcohol and nicotine), and marijuana dependence appears to be less severe than dependence on other drugs." So, while some people do get into trouble with marijuana and should be able to get help if they need it, most experts agree with the IOM that marijuana dependence is relatively rare and mild.

If people are being forced by the courts into treatment for marijuana that they don't really need, how does that affect people who really do need treatment for addiction to hard drugs?

Access to drug treatment is a serious problem, and there is every reason to believe that this problem is worsened by forcing 168,000 Americans per year into marijuana treatment because of arrests. According to government records, in 2007 more than 37,000 Americans who needed drug treatment had to wait a month or more before a treatment slot was available. This means that some who need help simply don't get it when they need it and are willing to accept it. For example, an October 1, 2009 story in the *Anchorage Daily News* reported that the city's only clinic offering methadone treatment to heroin addicts, "facing an influx of patients and not enough funding to treat them, has stopped accepting into treatment all new patients including pregnant women."

SOURCES:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) Highlights – 2007," February 2009
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Institute of Medicine, *Marijuana and Medicine: Assessing the Science Base* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999)