

Marijuana: Gateway Drug? Depends on what you mean by “gateway”

By Craig DeMelo

This week, **New Bedford Guide** decided to reopen the age-old discussion about whether or not marijuana is a gateway drug. In the article the author claims that since recreational usage often precedes stronger drugs, it is, in fact, a stepping stone. Upon examination, however, this oft-debunked talking point—a stalwart argument from the anti-legalization community—goes up in smoke.

First, the word “gateway” is problematic. The term generally means “an entry point,” in this case to narcotics and addiction. The main piece of evidence offered is the statement that “marijuana use is likely to precede use of other licit and illicit substances and the development of addiction to other substances.” Here, the word “precede” means “comes before,” but the implication is that it leads to more dangerous substances. This may seem like a distinction without a difference—but there is a difference, and it’s important.

It is fair to say that most people addicted to things like crack cocaine, heroine or other opioids first began recreational use with marijuana. Marijuana is cheap and accessible for people during their experimental teenage years. According to the **National Institute of Drug Abuse**—the source cited in the original piece—13% of 8th graders, 30% of sophomores, and 45% of seniors had tried marijuana at least once. This is unsurprising data.

But here’s the rub: as the adage goes “correlation does not equal causation.” Given the fact that a small fraction of those people will go on to become drug addicts, there is

clearly no evidence to suggest that marijuana causes people to try other drugs, or that the sensation fosters a desire for greater highs. The sheer number of people who have tried it—or who continue to use recreationally or medicinally—without graduating to more severe substances is damning to the central claim that it is an avenue to more nefarious drugs.

Further, alcohol—which is usually as available as the nearest liquor cabinet—is far more prevalent among those underage than weed. The **same survey** indicated 23% of 8th graders, 42% of sophomores, and 61% of seniors had tried alcohol at least once. It stands to reason that if marijuana—which alters your perception—is a gateway to other drugs, then alcohol ought to be as well. And yet, nobody seems to be arguing that alcohol is leading people down the road to drug addiction.

If marijuana were truly a gateway drug we should expect to see some statistical trends in usage between marijuana and other drugs. But that doesn't seem to be the case. In 2014, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health asserted that nearly half of all Americans have tried marijuana in some form after the age of 13. That number drops for cocaine use to nearly 15%, while less than 2% of Americans have tried heroin. Those subsequent stats would need to be much, much higher to even consider the theory.

This entire argument is an example of the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy—after this, therefore because of this. People who are heroin addicts may have smoked weed, but they're not addicts because they smoked weed (this is the same faulty rationale behind the now debunked theory that vaccines cause autism). This bit of logic is the central point NBG has glossed over.

There are a host of reasons why people try narcotics. Stats vary given certain qualifiers like age, gender, socioeconomic circumstances, family history, etc. Attempting to pin addiction down to one particular cause is a fool's errand.

Undoubtedly articles like NBG's are driven by the opioid crisis, but even that is better explained by the explosion of careless prescriptions, the influx of fentanyl, and the ever-burgeoning black market for secondhand pharmaceuticals.

Simply put: we all want someone or something to blame, but it makes no sense to point the finger at cannabis.

"Gateway drug" is a propagandistic boogeyman phrase designed to discourage people from smoking the devil's lettuce (which makes sense considering "gateway drug" was coined in the 1980s—the decade of the failed "War on Drugs"). Scientifically there is no connection. It may be the first mind-altering substance people consume (alongside alcohol), but there is no causal link between marijuana and harder drugs.

So put that in your pipe and smoke it.