

Poll: Majority of Utahns say yes to medical marijuana

Health • Liberalized views don't extend to recreational use of marijuana.

BY KIRSTEN STEWART

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America's liberalized views on marijuana are wafting into conservative Utah.

A new poll for The Salt Lake Tribune shows a slight majority of Utahns, 51 percent, support legalizing marijuana for medical use. But a solid 67 percent remain opposed to decriminalization for recreational use, suggesting the state's not ready for Colorado-style pot sales.

"Utah is just about the last state to do anything, but attitudes are changing," said poll respondent Mike Haechten, of Thompson Springs, a small town near Moab.

Growing acceptance of marijuana's medical benefits, whether to provide relief from arthritis pain or to dampen the side effects of chemotherapy for cancer patients, has driven more than 20 states to decriminalize the drug to varying degrees.

Two states, Colorado and Washington, have approved recreational use and national surveys show sentiment tipping in favor of outright legalization.

In the fall of 2013 Gallup announced that for the first time in more than 40 years of polling, a clear majority of Americans (58 percent) say marijuana should be legalized.

One reason could be changing perceptions of the dangers of weed, a drug once condemned in popular culture for inciting insanity and violence — an extreme example being the cult classic of the 1930s, "Reefer Madness."

Haechten believes the criminal penalties for possessing marijuana have been excessive and the dangers of abuse overstated, causing its medicinal benefits to be overlooked for too long.

The 51-year-old has Type I diabetes and wonders if ingestible cannabis preparations would relieve his recurrent stomach aches and limb pain.

"I know medical marijuana doesn't help everything, but it's a lesser evil than some of the prescription drugs on the market today," he said. "It needs further study and the [Food and Drug Administration's] stamp of approval."

But that won't happen until a critical mass of states permits medical use, giving drug companies the profit motive and legal freedom to fund research, he believes.

Still Haechten, like most Utahns, is opposed to recreational use, arguing, "We're not culturally ready for it."

The only legislation pending in Utah is a bill to allow the importation of a cannabis oil shown to calm seizures in children with epilepsy. Proponents say it is so low in tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, that it doesn't give users a high.

But the Tribune poll suggests Utahns support wider access for health reasons.

"People who are in pain have a right to alleviate that pain however they can. I don't care about what someone else does in the privacy of their own home," said 67-year-old Mike Padgen of Midvale.

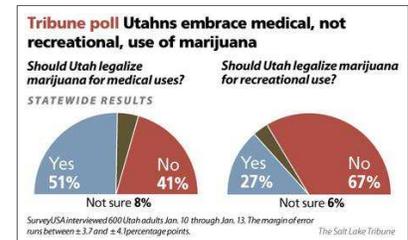
"My fear is that people will get high and get behind the wheel of a car," he said. "With recreational [use], the jury is still out on the long-term social ills."

The Tribune's automated survey of 600 Utahns was conducted by SurveyUSA from Jan. 10-13. The sample included home and cellular phones. The questions have margins of error ranging from 3.8 percentage points to 4.1 percentage points.

Support of legalization for medicinal purposes skews heavily non-Mormon and Democratic. Non-Mormons also narrowly favor recreational use. Margins of error are higher for these subsets.

"It needs to be governed because I don't want kids to be able to get their hands on it," said 74-year-old Dee Kooring, of east Salt Lake City's Sugar House neighborhood, a self-described "lapsed Catholic" who took a zero-tolerance stance with her own children but now backs full legalization.

"I would rather have people smoke a joint to relax than drink booze," she said. "Nobody has died from an overdose of marijuana, but they have died from alcohol and other drugs."



Most Mormons and Republicans, on the other hand, stand opposed to any step toward legalization.

“Can you imagine all the kids in this country getting on marijuana?” asked 93-year-old Jim Forsgren, of Salt Lake City, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a retired railroad worker. “We got enough problems with ordinary things, why make it worse?”

More women favor medical marijuana than men. But they’re less inclined to back recreational use.

“I know someone with seizures,” said Billie Nicholls, “and if we can help those kids, we should.”

But the 44-year-old Clearfield woman is wary of evidence that shows growing abuse of marijuana, even in states that permit only medicinal use. “I don’t want to see too many people get addicted,” she said.

Unlike national surveys charting surging support for legalization among Millennials, Gen X’ers and Baby Boomers, the Tribune poll shows no clear age-break in opinion.

“For me it’s personal, I guess,” said Salt Lake City resident Deana Young, 45, who opposes both medical and recreational use.

“ I have 18-year-old [twin] sons, and I’m just not ready for it. I could be convinced otherwise; I don’t have all the facts. But they’re awfully cute and I just don’t want them to be able to smoke pot.”

kstewart@sltrib.com

Twitter: @KStewart4Trib

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