



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on October 11, 2014

Pot Use Is Devastatingly Dangerous: Analysis of 20 Years of Studies

“I smoked pot as a kid, and I view it as a bad habit and a vice, not very different from ... cigarettes.” This sentiment, [expressed](#) by Barack Obama in January and shared by millions, has once again been challenged — this time by an academic review of 20-years worth of research.



The handiwork of Dr. Wayne Hall, a professor of addiction policy at King’s College London and drug advisor for the World Health Organization, the review implicates cannabis in a whole host of health problems, but, in particular, in mental-health issues and addiction among habitual users — especially teenagers. Writes the [Daily Mail](#):

Professor Hall found:

- One in six teenagers who regularly smoke the drug become dependent on it
- Cannabis doubles the risk of developing psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia
- Cannabis users do worse at school. Heavy use in adolescence appears to impair intellectual development
- One in ten adults who regularly smoke the drug become dependent on it and those who use it are more likely to go on to use harder drugs
- Driving after smoking cannabis doubles the risk of a car crash, a risk which increases substantially if the driver has also had a drink
- Smoking it while pregnant reduces the baby’s birth weight

... ‘There is no doubt that heavy users experience a withdrawal syndrome as with alcohol and heroin,’ [Hall said].

‘Rates of recovery from cannabis dependence among those seeking treatment are similar to those for alcohol.’

Opponents of marijuana legalization hope this study review will put the brakes on burgeoning efforts to legalize the drug. Twenty-three states and the U.S.’s capitol now allow medicinal cannabis; in addition, Washington and Colorado legalized even recreational use in 2012, and voters in Alaska, Oregon, and D.C. will consider following suit in the fall election.

This passion for legalization is no doubt intensified by the belief that pot use is relatively safe. As the pro-legalization Marijuana Policy Project’s Mason Tvert has [put it](#), “Voters are recognizing that marijuana is not as nearly harmful as they’ve been led to believe.”



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Yet Professor Hall asserts that marijuana as a safe drug is a dangerous misconception. And sharing this belief are experts who say his review should dispel that misconception. For instance, the *Daily Mail* quotes David Raynes of Britain's National Drug Prevention Alliance as saying, "There is no case for legalisation and we hope that this puts an end to the matter." Then there's Mark Winstanley of the charity Rethink Mental Illness, who opined, "Too often cannabis is wrongly seen as a safe drug, but as this review shows, there is a clear link with psychosis and schizophrenia, especially for teenagers." He says that smoking marijuana amounts to playing "Russian roulette with your mental health."

But some say this is a chicken-or-egg matter of which came first. For example, Tom McKay at Mic.com weighs in on Hall's study and [says](#) that the mental-illness link "may be partially the result of people with undiagnosed or latent mental disorders self-medicating." He further asserts, "Despite the fact that habitual marijuana use may be worse for us than the popular imagination, it's still not nearly as bad as basically every other popular narcotic."

Yet Dr. Hall isn't the only critic who says it's more than bad enough. Another is cannabis researcher Dr. Matthew Large of the University of New South Wales School of Psychiatry in Australia. While he supports marijuana legalization, he also admits "[T]here is no doubt that cannabis is a dangerous drug." Moreover, [writes](#) the *Daily Mail's* Lillian Radulova:

Dr Large said that studies have shown that cannabis smokers who develop schizophrenia, do so about three years earlier than people with schizophrenia who don't use the drug. It also leads to a "severer and more irreversible" form of the illness.

Furthermore, he revealed that the drug is particularly harmful for people under the age of 16 who have a higher chance of educational failure and, in the long term, are more likely to suffer cognitive impairment and have a significant loss of IQ by the age of 50 if they use cannabis.

As to this, National Public Radio (NPR) [reported](#) in March:

[Krista Lisdahl, director of the brain imaging and neuropsychology lab at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee,] says it's a mistake for teenagers to use cannabis.

"It's the absolute worst time," she says, because the mind-altering drug can disrupt development. Think of the teen years, she says, as the "last golden opportunity to make the brain as healthy and smart as possible."

Lisdahl points to a growing number of [studies](#) that show regular marijuana use — once a week or more — actually changes the structure of the teenage brain, specifically in areas dealing with memory and problem solving.

NPR also cited a Duke University study on IQ and reported, "'We found that people who began using marijuana in their teenage years and then continued to use marijuana for many years lost about eight IQ points from childhood to adulthood,' says study author Madeline Meier, now a professor at Arizona State University, 'whereas those who never used marijuana did not lose any IQ points.'"

Yet there again is the chicken-and-egg factor here: NPR mentions that those using cannabis the most had lower IQs to begin with.

Perhaps the harshest critic of marijuana use is Dr. Michael Savage, who aside from being a well-renowned talk-show host is a trained epidemiologist and has authored more than a dozen books on health and nutrition. During a 2010 radio segment — at the end of which he named approximately two dozen chemicals found in cannabis smoke — he [said](#) "Marijuana is far more dangerous than tobacco..."



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Savage, who nonetheless believes in the drug's decriminalization, continued, "Mainstream marijuana has ammonia levels that are up to 20 fold greater than that found in tobacco. Hydrogen cyanide, nitrogen oxide, and some aromatic amines, which are all carcinogenic, were found in marijuana smoke at concentrations three to five times those found in tobacco smoke."

Savage also mentioned that there's mercury in much of cannabis today because it may be grown in mercury-rich volcanic soil. He then alluded to mad-hatter syndrome, thus named because hatters many years ago would often develop mercury-induced dementia due to exposure to the metal, which they used to stiffen the fibers of their felt hats. This phenomenon led to the descriptive "Mad as a hatter."

But Savage opposes not only recreational marijuana use but also strongly condemns medical marijuana, maintaining that advocacy of it is nothing but "a big lie," "a madness." Savage points out that patients who need such a remedy can get a prescription for Marinol, which contains the active ingredient in marijuana, and don't need to inhale the smoke of what he calls a "toxic, poisonous weed."

Savage also [mentioned](#), in a radio broadcast last year, how Colombian drug lord Carlos Lehder claimed that his narcotics trafficking was motivated not just by money but also was a "political action." As Lehder [put it](#), "[T]he coke and the marijuana has been converted into a revolutionary weapon against the North American imperialism. The Achilles heel of imperialism are the stimulants of Columbia."

Of course, that could just have been a rationalization to justify behavior, something critics say is all-too-common among those involved in drugs — both providers and users alike.



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