

# Campus Police Officers' Attitudes Towards Marijuana Decriminalization Pilot Study

Eric Kulberg

Department of Education, University of New Hampshire

## Introduction

The public's support for marijuana legalization has increased substantially in recent years (Galston & Dionne, 2013). While much research has surrounded the public's views on marijuana legalization, very little research has looked at how police officers view legalization (Jorgensen, 2018; Wilson, et al, 1985; Beck & Summons, 1984; Beck, Kevelak, Summons, 1982). Even less has focused specifically on the police officers with the jurisdictions of college campuses.

To explore this gap in the literature, this study explored how campus police officers view marijuana legalization. At large, my scholarly interests are in the area of higher education policy as it relates to campus crime; this project is aligned to better understanding these topics. For this project, I was specifically interested in understanding (1) how campus police officers view trends in marijuana decriminalization/legalization, (2) if their views have changed since marijuana has come legalized in many parts of the county, (3) and how they feel marijuana use on campus should be addressed.

## Methods

- 11 pre-interview Qualtrics surveys to collect basic demographic and preliminary attitudinal data.
- Eight semi-structured interviews with campus police officers from a university in the Northeast.
- Initially recruited through direct emailing and then with snowball sampling
- As a result of COVID-19, all interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes each
- For analysis, interviews were transcribed verbatim followed by use of initial and focused coding to identify themes across responses.

## Preliminary Results

The campus police officers tended have ambiguous attitude towards marijuana legalization, all officers expressed a respect of whatever marijuana policy was set by the legislator.

**If the majority of the people in this country voted to legalize it, well, then I'd be fine with that if they voted to keep it illegal then I am going to enforce the laws of the state. I really don't have a personal care one way or the other. ~Respondent #1**

The officers' views of marijuana had not changed –officers reported even prior to decriminalization they had other priorities in enforcement. The officers interviewed stated they enforced marijuana laws because it was illegal and it helped develop their skills as police officers; however, none reported a particular interest in marijuana enforcement.

**When I was first starting, I was learning my job and my role in [marijuana enforcement] was exactly that... And as I progressed in as I gained experience, it became less and less of a problem for me. ~Respondent #4**

The officers felt enforcement of marijuana laws on campus should be consistent with alcohol enforcement. Officers also felt marijuana enforcement should be consistent among local police departments.

**Because substance abuse is such a critical factor to why we have crime on campus... we have almost zero tolerance policy on alcohol. But if you turn a blind eye to marijuana. We have this instance of an eighteen-year-old with a beer getting taken away in handcuffs and the eighteen-year-old with a joint... gets a walk because it's decriminalized. So for consistency, we enforce the law. ~Respondent #3**

## Discussion

Just as the public has become more tolerant towards marijuana, so too have campus police officers. While this study did not find that campus police officers tend support the entire legalization of marijuana, it did discover a generally ambiguous attitude toward marijuana.

This has important implications on policy; if individual officers care little about enforcement they will not perform that duty. And if police administrators do not care about marijuana neither will the department members.

**If the department doesn't care and doesn't put any emphasis on [marijuana], the officer would never be in a position to enforce it anyway. So it starts with the management of the department or the culture ~Respondent #8**

## References

Scan for references:

