

Subcommittee on Criminal Justice & Counterterrorism
Hearing Entitled, “Decriminalizing Cannabis at the Federal Level: Necessary Steps to
Address Past Harms”
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Statement of Alex Berenson

In January 2019, Simon & Schuster published my non-fiction book, *Tell Your Children*, a detailed and meticulously researched look at the links between cannabis, psychosis, and violence. *Tell Your Children* examines more than a generation of psychiatric research on the impact of THC—the active drug in cannabis—on mental illness. The book makes the case that we have strong evidence that early and heavy cannabis use can sharply raise the risk for schizophrenia, among the most devastating mental illnesses. In addition, no one disputes cannabis causes short-term paranoid and psychotic episodes in many users.

Regular cannabis use likely impacts mental health in other, more subtle ways too. Though many users believe it reduces their anxiety, like other drugs used as an anti-anxiety medicine it can cause severe rebound anxiety if users try to stop using or just cut down. And THC increasingly is found in autopsies following suicide, especially in young people. For example, in Colorado in 2020, more than one-third of autopsies of people under 25 who committed suicide found evidence of cannabis, more than alcohol or any other drug.¹ Further, a large study published by JAMA Psychiatry last year showed that regular cannabis use was associated with increased rates of suicidal ideation and planning and suicide attempts.²

Schizophrenia is a terrible disease, painful for users and devastating for their families. Its symptoms can be managed, but it has no cure, though people with schizophrenia do sometimes recover on their own as they age. But schizophrenia can have broader consequences too. Paranoia and psychosis are known factors increasing the risk of violence. People with schizophrenia commit violent crime at much higher rates than healthy people. The gap increases along with the severity of the violence; people with schizophrenia are roughly 20 times as likely to commit murder as health people.

Thus the legalization or promotion of any drug that may raise the risk of schizophrenia is fraught with risk. And that the cannabis industry and legalization advocates have done everything possible to play down the connection between cannabis and mental illness and to criticize or mock those who bring it to light. So I was not surprised when advocates and industry executives harshly criticized and tried to discredit *Tell Your Children*. But I was surprised and disappointed

¹ <https://www.cohealthdata.dphe.state.co.us/Data/Details/11>

² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2781215>

when many supposedly non-partisan media outlets such as The Washington Post followed, calling me “alarmist” and complaining about “the return of reefer madness.”

Now, however - only three-and-a-half years later - the truth about the connection between cannabis and psychosis appears to be becoming so obvious that even outlets that have been staunchly pro-legalization cannot ignore them. Since 2014, The New York Times has called for cannabis legalization.³ Last month, however, the Times published a long article headlined “Psychosis, Addiction, Chronic Vomiting: As Weed Becomes More Potent, Teens Are Getting Sick.”⁴

The Times is correct that cannabis has become far, far more potent. In the 1970s, most traditional “flower” cannabis contained perhaps 2 percent THC. By the 1990s, THC levels of 5 percent were more common. Today, however, the industry barely considers 5 percent THC to be cannabis at all, 20 percent THC cannabis is widely available at cannabis stores—which the industry prefers to call “dispensaries.” But the real crisis comes with the increasing use of near-pure THC extract, an oil that can be vaped—heated and inhaled. To be clear, although this comes from a plant, it is basically a chemical product; it might as well be synthesized in a lab like fentanyl. These extracts are often odorless and colorless, and teens and young adults can use them in secret; even vigilant parents may have no idea of what their children are doing. As the Times piece last month began: “Elysse was 14 when she first started vaping cannabis. It didn't smell, which made it easy to hide from her parents. And it was convenient—just press a button and inhale. After the second or third try, she was hooked. ‘It was insane. Insane euphoria,’ said Elysse.”

I have heard many similar stories from parents, police, and users themselves since *Tell Your Children* was published. The most frightening aspect of the current experiment with legalization is that the studies showing the link between cannabis, psychosis, and other mental illnesses often depend on data that is 10 to 40 years old and does not capture the astonishing rise in the potency of cannabis in the last decade. Even regular users now frequently complain that cannabis is too strong, but the industry—legal and illegal—is focused on serving the daily users who make up most of its revenue and use stunning amounts of THC. 2.5 milligrams of THC is considered the equivalent of one drink for a casual user, but tolerance builds up frequently, and heavy users will often use 100 or 200 milligrams of THC a day—sometimes more. We have almost no idea how this level of THC use will affect the brain long-term, especially for people who start as teenagers.

While the link between cannabis and mental illness is increasingly acknowledged, the potential link between cannabis and violence remains more controversial. However, what is clear is that major cities in states that legalized the recreational use of cannabis early—notably Denver,

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/high-time-marijuana-legalization.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/23/well/mind/teens-thc-cannabis.html>

Seattle, and Portland, Oregon—have seen significant negative changes in public safety in the last decade. Denver and Portland have gone from being two of the safest major cities to two of the more dangerous, with spectacular increases in murders since legalization. Correlation is not necessarily causation, but the promise that advocates made that cannabis legalization would aid public safety and reduce violent crime by allowing police to focus on non-drug offenses has proven demonstrably untrue. And specific cases in which heavy cannabis users became psychotic and committed bizarre and violent crime, often against family members, continue to emerge.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. I am happy to take questions.