

## **Opinion | Marijuana use is rising. The government needs to correct its mistake.**

A new report details federal actions to protect the public from the harms of cannabis.

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October 16, 2024 at 7:15 a.m. EDT

The nation’s leading scientific academies recently [issued an important report](#) calling for urgent federal action to protect the public from the harms of rising cannabis use. Policymakers should heed these recommendations — many of which don’t even require legislation.

The recommendations come from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, which Congress chartered to advise government officials on pressing scientific matters. This isn’t the first time the National Academies has weighed in on cannabis: In 2017, it issued a [thorough analysis](#) documenting the short- and long-term consequences of cannabis use, ranging from lower IQ in youth to increased incidence of psychosis and suicidal ideation.

More recent research has shown [additional risks](#), including higher rates of cancer and heart disease as well as [cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome](#), which involves [severe, continuous bouts of vomiting and stomach cramping](#).

Unfortunately, the message doesn’t seem to be getting through to the public. Despite hundreds of research articles documenting the consequences of cannabis use, daily or near-daily users now [exceed regular alcohol drinkers](#). As the National Academies’ 2024 report explains, states have legalized recreational marijuana with minimal federal oversight, allowing manufacturers to downplay harms and exaggerate therapeutic uses.

[Beau Kilmer](#), co-director of the Rand Drug Policy Research Center and a member of the committee that wrote the report, told me policymakers attributed their inaction to marijuana not being legalized at the federal level. “Federal decision-makers sat on the sidelines and watched industries grow,” he said.

What little guidance the federal government has issued has focused on sales and revenue, not mitigating the health impacts on users and communities. The new report details how to reorient cannabis policy through a public health lens.

Three key points stood out to me:

First, there are many things the federal government can do without passing new laws. For example, it could develop a research agenda to draw upon lessons learned from other harmful products, such as tobacco and alcohol.

Though all states have minimum age requirements for cannabis use, there are few restrictions on advertising. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could develop best practices to limit youth access. It can also set up a public health surveillance system to track public health impacts. And as I've [written before](#), the CDC can lead research into how law enforcement might gauge impairment and reduce cannabis-impaired driving.

Second, the CDC could lead public education campaigns that raise much-needed awareness among Americans about the proven harms of cannabis use. These can promote strategies for identifying risky behavior, treatments for people already suffering ill effects and targeted messaging for those especially vulnerable to harm.

The National Academies' report highlighted a specific issue that deserves the public's attention: Marijuana products have become markedly more potent in recent years. One National Institutes of Health study found that the average amount of THC, marijuana's primary intoxicating ingredient, has increased [more than tenfold](#) in cannabis plants over the past 50 years.

Moreover, though smoking remains the most common way to consume cannabis, other products have gained popularity, including concentrates ("dabs" and "shatter") that can contain THC concentrations as high as [90 percent](#). Higher doses lead to greater risk, and there is scant oversight of THC amounts in products such as vape pens and cannabis oils.

Finally, the government must reverse a law that unintentionally opened the door for dangerous, intoxicating products. The 2018 [Agriculture Improvement Act](#), a.k.a. the Farm Bill, removed hemp — products with up to 0.3 percent THC — from the Controlled Substances Act. One of hemp's derivatives is cannabidiol (CBD), which is not a psychoactive drug.

But CBD can be synthetically changed into THC as well as another form of the chemical, called delta-8 THC, which is mind-altering and [might have similar risks](#) as naturally occurring THC. These synthetic products are considered legal and not subject to limitations of cannabis sales. In recent years, delta-8 THC products — including gummies, vapes, infused beverages and smokable hemp sprayed with the substance — have proliferated.

Many users have confused these products with nonintoxicating hemp or CBD. Some have ended up hospitalized from accidental intoxication, including [two children](#) who ingested a parent's delta-8 THC gummies. They experienced decreased blood pressure and slowed breathing and required intensive care.

The National Academies' report is blunt: "Congress should refine the definition of 'hemp' to state clearly that no form of tetrahydrocannabinol [THC] or semisynthetic cannabinoid [CBD] derived from hemp is exempt from the Controlled Substances Act." Meanwhile, health officials should educate potential users that these products also carry substantial risk.

The bottom line from this report is that the federal government must stop ceding its authority to control these drugs. It never should have allowed the patchwork of state-by-state legalization, which fostered America's largely unregulated cannabis industry.

Protecting the public's health must come first. Now is a better time than never.