Marijuana Legalization Essay, Research Paper

Most Americans do not want to spend scarce

public funds incarcerating nonviolent marijuana

offenders, at a cost of $23,000 per year. Politicians

must reconsider our country’s priorities and attach

more importance to combating violent crime than

targeting marijuana smokers.Marijuana prohibition costs taxpayers at least

$7.5 billion annually. This is an enormous waste of

scarce federal dollars that should be used to target

violent crime.Marijuana prohibition makes no exception for the

medical use of marijuana. The tens of thousands of

seriously ill Americans who presently use marijuana

as a therapeutic agent to alleviate symptoms of

cancer, AIDS, glaucoma, or multiple sclerosis risk

arrest and jail to obtain and use their medication.Between 1978 and 1996, 34 states passed laws

recognizing marijuana’s therapeutic value. Most

recently, voters in two states — Arizona and

California — passed laws allowing for the medical

use of marijuana under a physician’s supervision.

Yet, states are severely limited in their ability to

implement their medical use laws because of the

federal prohibition of marijuana.America tried alcohol prohibition between 1919

and 1931, but discovered that the crime and

violence associated with prohibition was more

damaging than the evil sought to be prohibited. With

tobacco, America has learned over the last decade

that education is the most effective way to

discourage use. Yet, America fails to apply these

lessons to marijuana policy.By stubbornly defining all marijuana smoking as

criminal, including that which involves adults

smoking in the privacy of their own homes, we are

wasting police and prosecutorial resources, clogging

courts, filling costly and scarce jail and prison space,

and needlessly wrecking the lives and careers of

genuinely good citizens.Marijuana legalization offers an important

advantage over decriminalization in that it allows for

legal distribution and taxation of cannabis. In the

absence of taxation, the free market price of legal

marijuana would be extremely low, on the order of

five to ten cents per joint. In terms of intoxicating

potential, a joint is equivalent to at least $1 or $2

worth of alcohol, the price at which cannabis is

currently sold in the Netherlands. The easiest way to

hold the price at this level under legalization would

be by an excise tax on commercial sales. An

examination of the external costs imposed by

cannabis users on the rest of society suggests that a

“harmfulness tax” of $.50 – $1 per joint is

appropriate. It can be estimated that excise taxes in

this range would raise between $2.2 and $6.4 billion

per year. Altogether, legalization would save the

taxpayers around $8 – $16 billion, not counting the

economic benefits of hemp agriculture and other

spinoff industries.