



High Times In Seattle: How Perceptions Toward Marijuana Have Shifted

Naja Johnson, News Editor

In 2012, marijuana was legalized for recreational use in the state of Washington. Washington state became the second state next to Colorado to legalize the recreational use of cannabis, shifting the legal precedent surrounding medicinal and recreational drugs. In 2024, recreational marijuana use is legal in 24 states, whereas medicinal use is legal in 13 states.

12 years later, the legal terrain for marijuana remains uncertain. Despite marijuana being legal in nearly half of the United States, it is still criminalized federally. Across the nation, young adults have differing impressions on the topic of recreational and medicinal marijuana, which can be influenced by the state they live in.



Kay McHugh

While cannabis use remains a contentious topic amongst many Americans, students at Seattle University offered their perspectives surrounding the culture of cannabis use amongst young adults in college.

Jean Simpson, a fourth-year English major, opened up about her experience navigating attitudes around cannabis use in Seattle, coming from a state where cannabis use was prohibited.

“Where I grew up in North Carolina, weed was not legal. But I was never around anyone who smoked weed to begin with in my home state. So, when I moved to Washington it was a different type of culture to get used to. Being around so many people who smoke recreationally,” Simpson said.

Simpson recounted her own experience being exposed to the culture surrounding marijuana in Seattle.

“Based on my personal experience I’d say it’s overall not a great thing especially with the culture in Seattle being so hyper-focused on cannabis use. I think it affects people a lot more than they realize.”

Simpson attributed a lack of education about the long-term effects surrounding cannabis use in the general public to a misconception surrounding the impacts that cannabis can have.

“Overall, I do think it can be perceived as any other substance because there’s not a lot of in-depth understanding of the long-term effects like your mood or the whole idea of addiction surrounding cannabis. As per se alcohol, we’ve had a lot more experience studying the effects of alcohol and what drinking every day can do to your body,” Simpson said.

Simpson also mentioned the widespread usage of cannabis amongst residents of Capitol Hill, regardless of their method of obtaining cannabis. Simpson was asked if accessibility was an issue for the inhabitants of Capitol Hill.

“I don’t necessarily know if there’s an issue with accessibility because, in the end, people are going to go to get [cannabis] if they have to walk two blocks or five blocks. Before there were dispensaries, there were drug dealers, it’s always going to be in demand,” Simpson answered.

She articulated that impressionable young adolescents should be prepared and knowledgeable before experimenting with cannabis.

Another student at Seattle U chimed in on the incorporation of cannabis into college culture. Particularly their own experience with cannabis and their perspective of the legal precedent around the United States.

Luce Sartain, a fourth-year psychology and history major, has used cannabis as a recreational outlet to manage his anxiety. His interest was piqued in recreational usage after reading academic papers that discussed the medical benefits.

“I am someone who struggles with social anxiety, and I have found that when I am in large group settings, a small amount of THC and CBD can help alleviate some of my anxieties,” Sartain said. “I am also someone who has always struggled with sleep, and I have found that for me CBD before bed can help my muscles relax and THC can help me calm down a hyperactive brain.”

Given their largely positive experience with cannabis as an anxiety aid, Sartain weighed in with their views about legal discrepancies and accessibility for cannabis across the United States.

“I think whether it’s decriminalization or legalization, the standard should be the same in every state, as it is with alcohol. Perhaps within this system, states can execute laws which limit hours for selling and other restrictions.”

Despite cannabis not being legal at the federal level in the U.S., the shift towards more states legalizing recreational use reflects a cultural shift. Professor of Law at Seattle U, Debra Ahrens, discussed how the legalization of weed has changed social expectations over the last decade.

“I think it’s become very socially acceptable, online debates on whether you should take your children into cannabis shops. Legalization does send a social signal that this is something that is socially acceptable to do,” Ahrens said.

She then spoke to Washington state’s advancements in the legalization of cannabis use, highlighting how legalizing cannabis in Washington state for recreational use established a new and complex legal precedent in regard to marijuana in the state of Washington.

“We were on the leading edge of states that legalized cannabis for recreational use. We were a little later than other jurisdictions that legalized it for medical use. Legalizing it for recreational use carries a different social message than legalizing it for medical use,” Ahrens said.

She also revealed how prior convictions related to cannabis possession posed uncertainty and major difficulties for people with backgrounds related to cannabis prior to the legalization period.

“When we did it we didn’t do anything for people who already had convictions and so we had a lot of people who were walking around with convictions for possession, for basically just using cannabis. Now their behavior would be perfectly legal. And we don’t think about it as a social harm at this point,” Ahrens said.

Ahrens mentioned how the current legal landscape was not accommodating individuals with past histories with cannabis.

“At the time we legalized, we didn’t think through the kinds of ongoing repercussions for people who had convictions already,” Ahrens said.

The legalization of cannabis in Washington state has had a profound impact on the culture and social customs surrounding the recreational use of cannabis over the last 12 years. As the cultural landscape continues to shift and new laws are proposed and challenged, the societal impacts of cannabis use will continue to adapt.

