New York State Legalizes Recreational Marijuana

Proponents hope that decriminalizing pot will help address widespread and longstanding issues of racial inequity.

April 7, 2021 By Caroline Tien

On March 31, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA), making New York the 15th state to legalize the drug. Sponsored by Senator Liz Krueger (D–District 28) and Assembly Majority Leader Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes (D–Assembly District 141), MRTA permits adults 21 and older to consume marijuana for recreational purposes. Now, New Yorkers can possess—and smoke—openly.

But the bill's aims transcend the expansion of bodily freedoms.

"Unlike any other state in America, this legislation is intentional about equity," Peoples-Stokes told The New York Times. "Equity is not a second thought, it's the first one, and it needs to be, because the people who paid the price for this war on drugs have lost so much."

Black and brown people have been disproportionately affected by drug arrests. In view of this disparity, MRTA includes several provisions designed to assist these minority communities, both financially and otherwise. For example, 40% of the tax revenue from the sale of pot—which could potentially revitalize the state's COVID-19–weakened economy—will head their way, and applicable marijuana-related convictions will be expunged.

However, Peoples-Stokes's Republican colleagues were unhappy with this result.

"This deal legalizing marijuana is the result of closed-door discussions between leaders of one political party and a governor who is engulfed in scandal," Senator Rob Ortt (R–District 62) said. "The outcome of these partisan negotiations is a deeply flawed piece of legislation that will hurt the health and safety of New Yorkers."

In recent years, debate over the side effects of weed—and the potential consequences of lifting restrictions on its sale, possession and use—has divided Democratic and Republican lawmakers at almost every level of government. In a recent survey, researchers at the Institute of Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School, found that 49% of people who identify as Democrats support the legalization of marijuana, but only 32% of people who identify as Republicans do.

Interested in learning more about how smoking pot can affect your health? Read “Marijuana May Negatively Affect Women’s Fertility” and “Youth With Mood Disorders Who Use Marijuana at Higher Risk for Death.”

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