

# How Does Legal Cannabis Impact Crime

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Cannabis legalization is spreading through the United States rapidly, with states initiating medical marijuana programs or expanding to allow adult-use cannabis. This year alone, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut all voted to legalize recreational cannabis. Now, most states have some form of established cannabis program, either medical or adult-use, and cannabis dispensaries are becoming a familiar sight all over the country. While opponents of cannabis were initially fearful of the negative ramifications of legalization, a [recent report from the CATO Institute](#) has shown that cannabis legalization does not appear to significantly impact crime rates.

As legalization has become more common, many studies have been conducted to examine the effect of cannabis legalization on crime. Though some studies have revealed a reduction in crime rates in areas with cannabis dispensaries, others have shown an increase or no change at all. These mixed results in studying the connection between cannabis and crime is likely due to differences in established cannabis programs, with some states opting for medical-use only while others have legalized adult-use as well. Additionally, medical and adult-use programs across the country vary greatly in regards to regulations, oversight, and size.

## Medical Marijuana and Crime

Since the legalization of medical-use often pre-dates adult-use, most of the studies into the relationship between cannabis and crime have been conducted in states with only medical marijuana. States like Washington, Colorado, and California acted as early test subjects and, so far, most studies have shown that medical marijuana dispensaries have no impact on crime rates and can sometimes even reduce them. One study published in the Economic Journal concluded that crimes, including robberies, murders and aggravate assaults have all [dropped by around 13 percent](#) in areas close to medical marijuana states.

Another [study conducted in Sacramento, CA](#) in 2009 suggested “that the density of medical marijuana dispensaries may not be associated with crime rates or that other factors, such as measures dispensaries take to reduce crime (i.e., doormen, video cameras), may increase guardianship such that it deters possible motivated offenders.” These results indicate that medical marijuana legalization and the subsequent establishment of multiple dispensaries within a community will not increase violent or property crime rates. Additionally, the strict security regulations that must be followed by licensed dispensary operators ensure that their facilities are equipped with visual security measures that serve to deter potential crime.

Many opponents to cannabis legalization liken the connection between dispensaries and crime to other high-risk businesses such as liquor stores, but some research suggests that

dispensaries are more similar to pharmacies. The [Denver Police Department estimated](#) that approximately 17% of medical marijuana dispensaries “had been robbed or burglarized in the last year (2009),” which is the same rate reported for pharmacies during that time period. This is 3% less than liquor stores (20%) and 17% less than banks (34%).

## **Recreational Cannabis and Crime**

While results on the impact of medical marijuana on crime has been mixed, this is even more true for recreational cannabis. Some research does indicate a reduction in crime, but more often, research suggests that recreational cannabis has no impact on crime. This is evident in a study conducted in California from [RAND Corporation](#) which found “no relationship between county laws that legally permit dispensaries and reported violent crime.” Though opponents of cannabis fear that recreational cannabis facilities could attract crime and increase the number of robberies, burglaries, and property crimes, RAND’s research indicates the opposite.

Research published by the [Regional Science and Urban Economics](#) journal found that adding a dispensary to a neighborhood reduced the crime rate by an estimated 19% compared to the average crime rate for the same time period. [These results out of Denver, CO](#) suggest that cannabis dispensaries may be responsible for a significant reduction in crime rates that was not observed in neighborhoods without a dispensary.

Though some fear that states that legalize recreational cannabis will increase crime rates in neighboring states which have not legalized, and [some evidence](#) does suggest this, but other data indicates that this is not the case. [Research conducted on Colorado and Washington](#) revealed a reduction in “property crime and larceny in the border counties of neighboring states.” [Reductions in crime](#) were also apparent in Mexico in areas which border U.S. states with legal cannabis.

## **Conclusion**

The mixed results from studies on the impact of cannabis dispensaries on crime are likely due to the variations in programs between states, and in some states, between counties. In addition to the common differences in medical and recreational programs, some areas have opted for strict security regulations and oversight, while others have adopted relatively lax rules in comparison. Additionally, factors like high tax rates and lack of access can allow black market operators to undercut legal prices.

While more research into the impacts of medical and recreational cannabis dispensaries and crime is needed, current results imply a need for policymakers to be strategic when establishing their cannabis programs. When poorly secured, cannabis dispensaries could become targets for crime due to their high cash volume and valuable products. Comprehensive regulation and oversight ensure that these dispensaries do not attract crime and may even reduce crime rates in their communities.