

If we legalize pot, we must protect kids — especially black and brown kids

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After a failed attempt last year, Gov. Cuomo has again committed to legalizing adult use of marijuana. If approved, the plan absolutely must include strong protections to prevent kids from abusing the drug.

A just-released [analysis](#) of substance use among teens found that the percent of teens vaping marijuana doubled between 2018 and 2019. Furthermore, the number of eighth and tenth graders who said they use marijuana every day [went up significantly in 2018](#).

Those numbers could get even worse if new laws don't include the appropriate protections.

There are good reasons for supporting legalization, including hundreds of millions of new tax revenue dollars and the creation of a thriving new industry that could bring reinvestment dollars and new economic opportunities to minority communities.

These benefits make legalization good policy, especially if combined with smart and socially just actions such as those laid out in Bronx Borough President Rubén Díaz Jr.'s [“Marijuana Justice in New York”](#) report. The report puts forward a plan for criminal justice reform and economic empowerment to follow legalization.

But we must do more to protect our kids, especially because today's marijuana is not your mom's marijuana; [it is estimated to be at least three times more potent](#).

First and foremost, we must ensure that our children know the damage that marijuana can inflict on their health and development. There is a common, and dangerous, conception that marijuana is harmless, even for young people. This simply isn't true.

An abundance of [research](#) shows that marijuana can have detrimental effects on the health and welfare of youth. Marijuana use during adolescence is associated with impaired cognitive functioning, lower academic achievement, higher rates of school dropout, an elevated risk of dependence and increased rates of engaging in risky behaviors, such as unsafe sex or further experimentation with other drugs.

Across the nation, the numbers clearly paint a picture for concern.

We know that poor communities and communities of color have been historically ravaged by other legal industries, like tobacco and alcohol. The [rate](#) of cigarette smoking is twice as high among the poor. Alcohol abuse is [more prevalent](#) in low-income neighborhoods, with African Americans and Hispanics more at risk for dependence. If we let history repeat itself, the legalization and commercialization of marijuana could cause further damage.

The New York State Department of Health has rightly recommended that education officials carefully monitor marijuana use among youth. But we must go further. To create

and sustain healthy communities, it is vital that we increase our efforts to educate all youth about marijuana.

In January, WHEDco will do just that, piloting a drug education series in a peer-led after-school program, with a full rollout planned for the 2020-2021 school year. The program uses evidence-based strategies, providing kids with honest, scientific information. Neither punitive nor judgmental, its messaging emphasizes that youth must abstain from using the drug in order to avoid harmful risks, at least until they are adults and their brains are fully developed.

As a society, the most important responsibility we have is protecting our children. State and city governments must ensure that children and teens do not have access to marijuana, and are armed with age-appropriate, culturally sensitive and medically sound information about the risks of its use.

To achieve this, we propose that a portion of the tax revenue derived from the marijuana industry be dedicated to programs that help public schools educate students and families about marijuana, and to better prepare schools to identify and address marijuana use among the student population. Cuomo's plan, released last summer, proposes similar interventions.

The legalization of marijuana in 2020 seems likely. But if we don't simultaneously require and fund programs to protect our kids, there's an all-too-good chance legalization of marijuana will damage poor, black and brown youth the way alcohol and tobacco have ravaged their communities.

Russell is the president of WHEDco.

Link: <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-legalize-pot-but-protect-kids-20200114-gsnqmsirofcl3hkazf4efnibz4-story.html>