

Few problems with pot in California

By Adam Nagourney and Rick Lyman, New York Times

LOS ANGELES – In the heart of Northern California's marijuana growing region, the sheriff's office is inundated each fall with complaints about the stench of marijuana plots or the latest expropriation of public land by growers. Its tranquil communities have been altered by the emergence of a wealthy class of marijuana entrepreneurs, while nearly 500 miles away in Los Angeles, officials have struggled to regulate an explosion of medical marijuana shops.

But at a time when polls show widening public support for legalization – recreational marijuana is about to become legal in Colorado and Washington, and voter initiatives are in the pipeline in at least three other states – California's 17-year experience as the first state to legalize medical marijuana offers surprising lessons, experts say.

Warnings voiced against partial legalization – of civic disorder, increased lawlessness and a drastic rise in other drug use – have proved unfounded.

Instead, research suggests both that marijuana has become an alcohol substitute for younger people here and in other states that have legalized medical marijuana, and that while driving under the influence of any intoxicant is dangerous, driving after smoking marijuana is less dangerous than after drinking alcohol.

Although marijuana is legal here only for medical use, it is widely available. There is no evidence that its use by teenagers has risen since the 1996 legalization, though it is an open question whether outright legalization would make the drug that much easier for young people to get, and thus

contribute to increased use.

Read the whole story