

Overview of the Argument

The shift from the term “marijuana” to the use of the term “cannabis” represents more than just a linguistic preference; it signifies an effort to undo decades of stigma rooted in racial and xenophobic biases.

The historical use of “marijuana” to demonize the plant and its users established a legal and social framework that viewed cannabis as a dangerous substance and its users as less than human. In contrast, “cannabis has emerged as a term associated with medical and therapeutic legitimacy, opening doors for legalization and decriminalization efforts.

This shift in terminology will continue to play a critical role in evolving cannabis policy from criminalization to regulation, helping to shape a more health-oriented and scientifically informed approach to cannabis policy.

The proposal to replace the term ‘marijuana’ with ‘cannabis’ in statutes stems from two key considerations:

- 1. Scientific Accuracy:** Marijuana is not the botanical or scientific term for the plant. The correct term is Cannabis, L which aligns with scientific nomenclature.
- 2. Stigma Reduction:** The term ‘marijuana’ carries significant stigma due to its historical usage in propaganda campaigns that associate it with marginalized communities, criminality, and deviance.

Historical Context and Stigmatization

John Ehrlichman, a former Nixon domestic policy chief, famously revealed that the Nixon administration intentionally used drug policies to target specific groups. As Ehrlichman explained:

“The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and Black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

This statement underscores how the term ‘marijuana’ became weaponized as part of the broader agenda stigmatizes certain communities that remain today. Consequently ‘marijuana’ arrests disproportionately affected Black communities. Despite similar usage rates, Black individuals are 3.73 times more likely than white individuals to be arrested for marijuana possession.

Shifting Terminology

States, including California, Main, Vermont, Washington, and Hawaii have already transitioned to using ‘cannabis’ in their legal frameworks. This change reflects a growing recognition of the need to:

- Align language with scientific and botanical accuracy.
- Reduce the racial and social stigma historically associated with the term ‘marijuana.’

Historically, before 1900, most references to cannabis in the press related to its medical or industrial uses. It was not until the early 20th century that the term ‘marijuana’ became prominent in anti-drug campaigns, often with xenophobic undertones, as illustrated by a 1905 LA Times article that sensationalized the plant’s effects and tied it to Mexico. This framing contributed to decades of misinformation and fearmongering.

Prior to the early 1900's press references to cannabis relate either to its medical usage or its role as an industrial textile. But then, in the early 1900's you start to see accounts in major newspapers like the LA Times story from 1905 ("Delirium or death: terrible effects produce by certain plants and weeds growing in Mexico.") NPR report "The Mysterious History of Marijuana – July 22, 2013.

The Importance of Terminology in Public Perception

Framing, especially in the context of drug policy, plays a significant role in shaping public perception and discourse. The terms we use to describe the plant influence how society views it. The shift from 'marijuana' to 'cannabis' represents an effort to

- Reframe cannabis as a legitimate medical and therapeutic substance.
- Move away from the racialized and criminalized connotations associated with the term 'marijuana.'

By changing the language, we can help foster a more informed and compassionate understanding of cannabis. This shift can play a pivotal role in transforming opponents into supporters by exposing the truth behind decades of propaganda.

Broader Implications for Policy and Social Justice

The terminology shift is not merely symbolic, it has tangible implications for policy and social justice. By adopting 'cannabis' in statutes, we

- Signal a departure from the prejudiced policies of the past.
- Contribute to the ongoing efforts to decriminalize and regulate cannabis in a manner that prioritizes public health and scientific research.
- Help reduce racial disparities in enforcement by reshaping the narrative around the plant.

Conclusion

Replacing the term marijuana with cannabis in statutes is a necessary step toward reducing stigma and systemic biases in policy, promoting scientific accuracy and addressing historical injustices. This change reflects a broader cultural and policy shift towards a more rational and equitable approach to cannabis regulation. By adopting more precise and respectful language, we pave the way for a future in which cannabis policy is informed by science, compassion, and a commitment to society.