



Can changing the name 'marijuana' help address racial divide from America's drug war?

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Some call it "weed" or "pot." Others use "ganja" or "hash." But the most common way to refer to the dried buds and leaves of the cannabis plant is "marijuana."

Now, as legalization and decriminalization of marijuana spread, some wrestle with the word because of its racially charged etymology.

Last week, the U.S. House of Representatives [passed a bill to decriminalize cannabis](#) at the federal level. The [Marijuana Opportunity, Reinvestment and Expungement \(MORE\) Act](#), among other provisions, would replace statutory references to "marijuana" and "marihuana" with "cannabis."

A few states have already presented legislation to strike the word "marijuana" from local laws. Last month, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee [signed a bill](#) that erases "marijuana" from state statute to use "cannabis" instead. [Virginia](#) and [Maine](#) have proposed similar bills.

Lawmakers seek to redress the disproportionate impact anti-drug policies have had on people of color, particularly Black and Latino communities. Racial disparities in marijuana-related arrests, for example, persist even in states that have legalized or decriminalized it, according to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#).

"The term 'marijuana' has a racist history in the United States," Inslee said during [the bill signing ceremony](#). "It was used in anti-immigrant rhetoric in the early 20th century. We are tied to our history of language, and changing the word to 'cannabis' signals that we acknowledge the history of that language that targeted communities of color."

A brief history of marijuana

The word "marijuana" ("marihuana" in Spanish) comes from Mexico and entered American lexicon in the late 19th century. By the 1910s, "marijuana" was one of the most widely used words for cannabis.

During the 1930s, however, anti-drug advocates began to spread misinformation on the effects of pot. In 1937, federal government [passed a law](#) that stopped the recreational use of pot, pushed by the commissioner of what was then the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger.

Anslinger is said to be responsible for adopting "marijuana" to exoticize weed and stoke fear.

"We can't deny that this country has a problem and has a very, very difficult time talking about race. And the [war on drugs](#) has very, very specific roots in that racial dialogue in this country," said Toi Hutchinson, president and CEO of the [Marijuana Policy Project](#), an advocacy organization.

Today, as [states have gone down the road of legalization](#), marijuana has grown into a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry. But communities that have been harmed the most by the drug's prohibition benefit the least from the market, the MORE Act says.

"A legacy of racial and ethnic injustices, compounded by the disproportionate collateral consequences of 80 years of cannabis prohibition enforcement, now limits participation in the industry," the MORE Act reads.

On average, a Black person is almost four times more likely to be arrested for possessing marijuana than a white person, though Black and white people use cannabis at a similar rate, according to the ACLU.

For Hutchinson, understanding the history of marijuana's criminalization and its consequences is more than what word people use for it.

"Personally, I don't care what you call it. But I want you to know why, and I want you to know how we got here," Hutchinson said. "You can't fix what you can't see."

Isaac Campos, associate professor of history at the University of Cincinnati, said the narrative that the federal government purposefully decided to use the word "marijuana" in the early 20th century to demonize the drug is incomplete and inaccurate.

He said false stories that cannabis caused madness or violence didn't originate in the U.S. but in Mexico, where negative associations with the drug were widespread.

"The use of the word is in no way racist," said Campos, who wrote ["Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs"](#). "It's just the Mexican word for marijuana, and to stop using it is just to try to erase, essentially, Mexico's history with this drug and Mexico's influence on the United States."

He said the debate around whether the word "marijuana" is racist detracts from issues like how to regulate the industry as the country moves toward federal legalization.

"This fussing about the word is distracting people from the real issues that they should be thinking about as we move down the legalization route."

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