

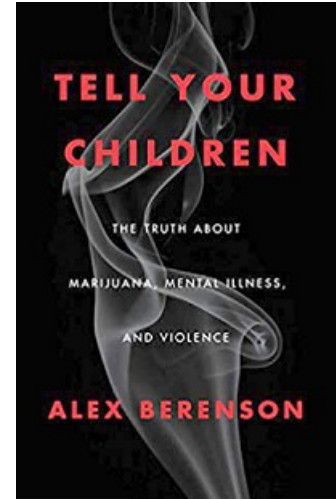
# Don't kid yourself—marijuana is a dangerous, violent drug

## BOOK REVIEW

**Alex Berenson, *Tell Your Children: The Truth About Marijuana, Mental Illness and Violence* (New York: Free Press, 2019)**

*By Robert Barwick*

This is a uniquely important book. Author Alex Berenson has put his head up over the parapet in the cannabis legalisation battle to state the truth: marijuana is a very dangerous drug. Berenson is not a political conservative, nor a religious wowser; he's a mainstream *New York Times* journalist who had no particular opinions about marijuana or the legalisation campaign until his wife, a psychiatrist, noted in conversation that there is a link between the drug and violent psychosis. This is a link that the extremely well-funded drug legalisation lobby has spent decades ridiculing as a figment of fearful conservative imaginations, as expressed in the badly-acted 1936 film *Reefer Madness*. Funded by billionaire George Soros and other super-rich individuals, the legalisation lobby has run a massive public relations campaign, drawing in Hollywood and the music industry and politicians, to present marijuana as the most mild and harmless of all narcotics, the only real side-effects of which are hunger and occasional paranoia. Berenson set out to see if there is indeed a link between the drug and psychosis, and his exhaustive investigation is documented in this book.



Berenson opens with a case from Australia, that of massmurderer Raina Thaiday, the 37-year-old Cairns mother who stabbed to death seven of her children and her niece in December 2014. Thaiday's murder spree shocked the nation, but less well known is that the judge at her trial, Justice Jean Dalton, found that Thaiday's long-term marijuana use had caused her psychosis. "Thaiday had a history of the use of cannabis since she was in Grade 9", Dalton wrote in her report. "All the psychiatrists thought that it is likely that it is this long-term use of cannabis that caused her mental illness, schizophrenia, to emerge."

There are many horrific cases like Thaiday's, which Berenson documents. But far from just writing a book of anecdotes, Berenson digs into and draws out the findings of the myriad scientific and epidemiological health studies of marijuana over many decades. Some studies were specifically into marijuana, while others were more general health studies that happened to produce large data sets in which the effects of marijuana use could also be measured. These included, for instance, a 1980s Swedish study of thousands of army conscripts over many decades, and a multi-decadal study conducted in the New Zealand city of Dunedin of the health of hundreds of children born in the 1970s as they grew up. All of the studies establish a clear link between marijuana use and violent psychosis, especially for young people. This is the substance of the book, which deserves serious study.

The problem is that these studies are little known outside of the medical science community. Therefore, the legalisation lobby is able to cherry-pick studies that promote its agenda. One of these was by the US Institute of Medicine, now the National Academy of Medicine, in 1999, called "Marijuana and Medicine: Assessing the Science Base". Its reports are considered the gold standard for medical research in the United States. Berenson quoted its main finding: "Except for the harms associated with smoking, the adverse effects of marijuana use are in the range of effects tolerated for other medicines." He continued: "It recommended continued research into marijuana for many diseases. In terms of negatives, the report focused on potential physical hazards from smoke and largely discounted other concerns. Only a few smokers became dependent on marijuana, withdrawal symptoms were 'mild and short-lived', and no evidence proved that marijuana use led to harder drugs. As for mental illness, the 1999 report hardly mentioned it. It said cannabis psychosis was almost always temporary and dealt with schizophrenia in a single paragraph, saying 'The relationship between marijuana and schizophrenia is not well understood.' It even suggested 'the possibility that schizophrenics might obtain some symptomatic relief from moderate marijuana use'."

Such a report can be very influential, but dead wrong. For instance, it also expressed a view on prescription opiates, which informed its findings on the medical benefits of marijuana. Approving the increase in opiate prescriptions, it stated: "[Fears] that liberal use of opiates would result in many addicts ... have been proven unfounded. ... Few people begin their drug addiction problems with misuse of drugs that have been prescribed for medical use ... [and] the diversion of medically prescribed opiates to the black market is not generally considered to be a major problem."

Berenson pointed out that 600,000 opiate deaths later in the USA, it is clear that the report, and the doctors who prescribed opiates, "underestimated the risks", to put it mildly. And the same report underestimated the risks of marijuana. In 2017, the same National Academy of Medicine effectively

admitted so itself, following another study of marijuana which it published in a 468-page research report titled “The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids”. This time, after years of legalisation and increased use boosted by its 1999 report, the Academy found “strong evidence that marijuana causes schizophrenia and some evidence that it worsens bipolar disorder and increases the risk of suicide, depression, and social anxiety disorder. ‘Cannabis use is likely to increase the risk of developing schizophrenia and other psychoses; the higher the use, the greater the risk’, the scientists concluded.”

### **‘It never hurt me’**

The kids of the rebels of the 1960s and 1970s are the lawmakers of today, and so they are influenced by the anecdotal claim of so many that “marijuana never hurt me”. What they do not understand is the nature of the drug today, and the way it is consumed. Berenson documents the basic facts.

For one, marijuana is not comparable to alcohol. Yes, in sheer numbers of people and costs, alcohol causes more damage than other drugs. But that is only because it is the most widely used—a legacy of the fact that beer and wine have been staples for thousands of years. Alcohol reduces inhibitions, and over-consumption causes people to act on their feelings. The damage comes in the form of physical injuries from fights and accidents, and long-term physical health problems. The damage caused by cannabis is far more extreme. According to US figures, users tend to use heavily—much more heavily than the average drinker uses alcohol. While only one drinker in 15, or about 7 per cent, drinks daily or almost daily, about 20 per cent of all cannabis users use at that rate, a percentage that has soared since 2005, Berenson notes.

Moreover, “All those people are using cannabis that by historical standards is shockingly potent”, Berenson writes. “Through the mid-1970s, most marijuana consumed in the United States contained less than 2 per cent THC. Today’s users wouldn’t even recognise that drug as marijuana. Marijuana sold at legal dispensaries now routinely contains 25 per cent THC. Imagine drinking martinis instead of nearbeer [i.e. malt-based brewed drinks containing 0.5 per cent alcohol or less] to get a sense of the difference in power.”

The many studies that Berenson cites establish the link between this type of consumption in young people, and schizophrenia and psychosis, which can suddenly turn violent. The most disturbing chapter of the book details case after case of horrific murders by people in a state of violent psychosis attributed to their marijuana consumption. Like Raina Thaiday, far too often these cases involved brutal murders of family members, loved ones whom the perpetrator would never want to hurt under any circumstances, but whom the cannabis-induced paranoid psychosis convinced the perpetrator were suddenly a terrifying threat.

The broad statistics prove that marijuana legalisation has not led to the nirvana its advocates promised. “All four of the [US] states that legalised in 2014 and 2015—Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington—have seen sharp increases in murders and aggravated assaults since legalisation”, Berenson reports. “Combined, the four states saw a 35 per cent increase in murders and a 25 per cent increase in assaults between 2013 and 2017, far outpacing the national trend, even after adjusting for changes in population. (Across the United States, murders have risen 20 per cent and aggravated assaults 10 per cent over that period.) Knowing exactly how many of these crimes are related to marijuana is impossible without researching each of them in detail, but police reports and arrest warrants show a clear connection in many cases.”

In Colorado, the state that pioneered legalisation, Berenson interviewed emergency room psychiatrists, who confirmed the rise in violence. Describing marijuana as “insidious”, they said they had tried to speak out in their promarijuana state, but had failed, as “the community is not receptive”.

### **Prohibition myth**

The legalisation lobby has well-worn arguments against the prohibition of marijuana, which they characterise as illinformed and prejudiced. Berenson takes these on. For instance, the hate-figure for legalisers is Harry Anslinger, the head of the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics (the predecessor of the Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA) in 1930- 62. Anslinger is viewed as a racist who exaggerated the drug’s association with Mexican immigrants to get it banned. Anslinger was a racist, Berenson concedes, but



Berenson has been heavily attacked by the powerful marijuana lobby.

points out that Mexico banned the drug in 1920, 17 years before the United States did—clearly Mexico’s decision to prohibit marijuana wasn’t driven by anti-Mexican racism, but by the knowledge that it caused mental illness and violence. Berenson quotes Anslinger’s description of the effects of marijuana:

“Addicts may often develop delirious rage during which they are temporarily and violently insane ... [which] insanity may take the form of a desire for self-destruction or a persecution complex to be satisfied only by the commission of some heinous crime.”

As this accurately describes the many cases documented in this book, Berenson makes the point that Anslinger may have been racist, but he was also right all those decades ago.

One of the arguments of marijuana proponents is that it is a natural plant that has been consumed for thousands of years. That is true, but because it is true, the dangers of the drug have also been known for centuries. Berenson documents this old knowledge, from places as different as Mexico and India, which proves that the link between marijuana and mental illness has been established for a very long time. Berenson shows that modern studies confirm the link identified in Indian studies from the 19th century.

An aspect of marijuana that Berenson doesn’t touch on is its connection to the epidemic of mass-shootings in the United States. Perhaps he may have thought it would be too controversial, and distract from the essence of his book. However, the correlation between young mass-shooters and heavy marijuana consumption is too strong for it not to be a factor, as other researchers have noted.

Berenson’s conclusion is worth quoting: “[I] am old enough to understand how difficult a task I have set myself with this book. If you are an average American, you believe both medical and recreational marijuana should be legal. I’m trying to change your mind. And changing someone’s mind is next to impossible. I mean anyone’s mind, of anything. People think what they think. So, this book all by itself may not do much. But I hope at the least it will make you sceptical of the pro-marijuana arguments that advocates have sold you for twenty-five years. More, I hope it will open your eyes to the mental illness and violence that marijuana causes in your community, whether that community is Bellingham or Burlington, Five Points in Denver or Little Five Points in Atlanta, Park Slope or Pacific Heights. Nothing is more powerful than personal experience. Open your eyes. See the truth. Tell your children.”

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