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NEWS

Colorado's \$1 Billion Pot Industry Saves Towns as It Sows Mayhem

JENNIFER OLDHAM | MARCH 9, 2016

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- Cities and counties share in \$135 million of state tax revenue
- Fifth-graders become dealers as more marijuana crosses borders

Taxes generated by Colorado's \$1 billion marijuana industry are keeping some struggling towns solvent even as growing numbers of high-schoolers are getting stoned at lunch, police are coping with a doubling of cannabis-related traffic deaths and doped-up tourists flock to emergency rooms.

About 938 dispensaries, which outnumber Starbucks in Colorado, in 2015 yielded \$135 million in state taxes and fees, 44 percent more than a year earlier. Yet as the market enters its third year after voters legalized retail sales in 2012, officials question whether the newfound income outweighs the escalating social costs.

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Colorado's legal pot is hard to contain. Sheriffs in neighboring states are overwhelmed by an influx of marijuana, according to a September report by a consortium of federal, state and local drug-enforcement agencies. The U.S. Supreme Court is reviewing a case filed by the attorneys general of Nebraska and Oklahoma against Colorado that argues drugs are spilling across state lines, burdening law-enforcement agencies.

Driving High

At home, the money flows. Denver, home to 85 percent of Colorado's pot stores, collected about \$29 million in marijuana taxes and fees in 2015, with \$11 million budgeted to pay for regulation, enforcement and drug prevention. The rest went into the city's general fund. Yet local officials placed a moratorium on new outlets until May after an economist found the market saturated, and police said the industry is stretching already-strained resources.

A driver who told police he was under the influence of cannabis and alcohol caused a fiery six-vehicle accident in Denver in August, killing one and injuring several others. In Colorado, about 20 percent of 2014 traffic fatalities involved drivers who tested positive for cannabis, according to the report. And emergency-room visits at one Aurora hospital by high out-of-state residents doubled that year, according to the New England Journal of Medicine.

“In practice it’s been very difficult, if not impossible, to get our arms around what the impact is in Colorado,” said Marco Vasquez, chair of the marijuana issues subcommittee for the Colorado Association of Chiefs of Police. “I don’t know that the revenue gained will ever outweigh what the social costs are.”

School counselors told researchers who compiled the law-enforcement report that so many kids are high it’s impossible to apprehend all but the most impaired. In one instance, a counselor reported that a father allowed two brothers to “smoke a bowl” before school. Others noticed an increase in number of parents showing up to school stoned.

At Monfort Elementary School, four 10-year-olds were caught buying and selling edible candy bars they stole from their grandparents in April 2014, shocking John Gates, the director of safety and security for Greeley-Evans School District 6.

“I’ve often said I’ve seen it all and clearly I haven’t,” said Gates, a former police officer.

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Crude Pot Is Not Medicine

Be sober-minded; be watchful. 1 Peter 5:8

