

Marijuana in Virginia

Arrests, Usage, and Related Data

Jon Gettman , Ph.D.

The Bulletin of Cannabis Reform

www.drugscience.org

10/19/2009

Marijuana in Virginia

Introduction

This state report is part of a comprehensive presentation of national, state, county, and local level data on marijuana arrests in the United States. The primary report in this collection is "Marijuana Arrests in the United States (2007)".¹ Additional details on marijuana arrests and related topics in Virginia are available in the Marijuana Policy Almanac², from which the data presented below has been excerpted. Arrest totals are based on Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program data; local data may differ due to various reasons, including reporting procedures and data availability.

There were 19,726 arrests for marijuana offenses in Virginia in 2007, representing an arrest rate of 256 per 100,000, which ranks Virginia at number 25 in the nation. There were an estimated 633,000 past year marijuana users in Virginia during 2007. Reconciling this estimate with the number of arrests for marijuana offenses provides an arrest rate of 3,116 per 100,000 users, which ranks Virginia at number 29 in the nation.

In terms of overall severity of maximum sentences for marijuana possession, Virginia ranks number 49 in the nation (based on penalties for a first offense). When it comes to penalties for just under 1 ounce of marijuana, Virginia is ranked at number 9, along with 4 other states (because of similarities between states there are only 12 rankings in this category). Here are the penalties for possession of various amounts of marijuana in Virginia:

Amount	Max. Sentence	Max. Fine
1 Ounce*	30 days	\$500
2 Ounces	30 days	\$500
3 Ounces	30 days	\$500
4 Ounces	30 days	\$500

(*To simplify comparisons, for some states this category covers amounts just under 1 ounce)

Marijuana possession arrests accounted for 89% of all marijuana arrests in Virginia during 2007. (Nationally, marijuana possession arrests account for 89% of all marijuana arrests.) There were 17,556 arrests for marijuana possession in Virginia in 2007, and 2,170 arrests for marijuana sales. The arrest rate for marijuana possession in Virginia was 228 per 100,000 for 2007, while the arrest rate for marijuana sales was 28. Marijuana arrests also accounted for 55% of all drug arrests in Virginia during 2007.

¹ http://www.drugscience.org/Archive/bcr7/bcr7_index.html

² http://www.drugscience.org/States/US/US_home.htm

Marijuana in Virginia

Here is an overall scorecard for how Virginia ranks nationally in terms of marijuana arrests, penalties, and marijuana use.

Category	Ranking
Maximum Sentences for Possession	49
Maximum Sentence for Possession of 1 ounce	9
Arrest Rate per 100,000 population	25
Arrest Rate per 100,000 users	29
Past Month Users (Pct.)	17
Past Year Users (Pct.)	23
Past Month Users Age 12 – 17 (Pct.)	11
Past Year Users Age 12 – 17 (Pct.)	21

This report provides a summary of the following topics related to marijuana arrests in Virginia: (1) related national trends, (2) trends in Virginia marijuana arrests and marijuana use, (3) the costs of marijuana arrests in Virginia, (4) statistics on past month and past year marijuana use in Virginia by age group, (5) county level rankings in marijuana arrests and rates, and (6) drug treatment admissions for alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. Extensive detail on these and related subjects, including local agency marijuana arrest data and historical data, is available in table format in the on line Marijuana Policy Almanac³ for Virginia and other states, as well as similar national data.

1) Background – National Trends in Arrests and Marijuana Use from 2003 to 2007

While marijuana arrests have increased significantly since the 1980s, the prevalence of marijuana use in the United States has remained essentially unchanged.

Marijuana arrests in the United States increased from 755,200 in 2003 to 872,720 in 2007. This represents an average annualized change of +2.93% per year.

Historically, marijuana arrests in the United States increased by 150% in the 1990s, rising dramatically from 287,850 in 1991 to 723,627 in 2001, an average annualized change of 8.74% per year. During this time the number of individuals who reported marijuana use in national surveys increased modestly from 19.2 million in 1991 to 21 million in 2001.

The arrest rate for marijuana offenses (possession and sales combined) in the United States has increased from 260 per 100,000 in 2003 to 290 in 2007. This represents an average annualized change of +2.19% per year.

The number of past year marijuana users in the United States has remained relatively stable during this period, changing from 25.5 million annual users in 2003 to 25.2 million annual users in 2007. The number of past month users has also remained the same, 14.6 million in both 2003 and 2007.

On a percentage basis, annual marijuana use was reported by 10.78% of the population in 2003 and 10.22% in 2007, while monthly use was reported by 6.18% in 2003 and 5.92% in 2007.

³ http://www.drugscience.org/States/US/US_home.htm

Marijuana in Virginia

Consequently, at the national level over the last five years, an increase in marijuana arrests of 2.93% per year has resulted in an average annualized decrease in the number of annual marijuana users of 0.21% per year and a similar decrease in the prevalence of annual marijuana use of 0.03% per year.

2) Marijuana Arrest and Use Trends in Virginia (2003 – 2007)

Marijuana arrests in Virginia increased from 14,686 in 2003 to 19,726 in 2007. The arrest rate in 2003 was 199 per 100,000 while in 2007 it was 256.

Compared to a 2.93% average annual increase in marijuana arrests nationally, marijuana arrests in Virginia increased by 6.08% per year. (While the arrest rate nationally increased 2.19% annually in this period, in Virginia the arrest rate changed by 3.79% per year.)

During this same period, the number of annual marijuana users in Virginia increased from 572,000 in 2003 to 633,000 in 2007. This was an average annualized change of 2.05% per year. The number of monthly marijuana users increased from 352,000 in 2003 to 411,000 in 2007, which produced an average annualized change of 3.15%.

3) The Costs of Marijuana Laws

The above comparison of marijuana arrests and marijuana use provide a basis for evaluating the benefits of marijuana laws. Here are three perspectives that help frame the issue of evaluating the costs of marijuana laws in Virginia.

a) Fiscal Costs.

The criminal justice system in Virginia cost \$4.14 billion for 2006. This includes state, county, and local costs. Here is the breakdown for those costs:

Police Protection	\$1.74 billion
Judicial and Legal Services	\$725.36 million
Corrections	\$1.68 billion
Total	\$4.14 billion

The federal Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) provides a simple way of making a general estimate of the criminal justice costs of drug-related arrests. Actually, estimating the costs of different types of arrests is a very complicated challenge because of the differences between individual offenses and, for example, the investigative and follow-up work they require. However the use of a percentage basis method provides a general estimate of the costs associated with marijuana offenses. The method utilized by ONDCP is to (a) calculate the percentage of total arrests accounted for by drug arrests and then (b) apply that percentage to total criminal justice system costs.

There were 324,061 arrests in Virginia in 2006. There were 16,771 marijuana arrests that year, accounting for 5.18% of all arrests in Virginia for 2006. Consequently, according to this percentage basis method of estimation, marijuana arrests cost \$214.42 million in Virginia for 2006.

Marijuana in Virginia

b) Opportunity Costs

Budgets are, out of necessity, about making choices. This is especially true when resources are scarce, such as when state and local governments are grappling with budget gaps between revenue and program commitments. Economists recognize opportunity costs as the consequences of making specific budgetary decisions. Providing funds for one program often means accepting less or no funds for some other government activity. For example, providing law enforcement with the obligation, or opportunity, to make arrests for marijuana offenses deprives law enforcement of funds to apply to other investigations and activities.

Law enforcement agencies publish statistics on their ability to resolve known offenses through the arrest of criminal suspects. After an offense is reported to the police, the objective is “cleared” by an arrest. Crime rates are based on the number of reported offenses. Arrest rates are based on the number of arrests. Clearance rates, usually provided for the most serious crimes, are based on the percentage of known offenses cleared by arrest.

Here are the 2007 clearance rates for serious crimes in Virginia:

Murder	54.00%
Rape	36.90%
Robbery	25.40%
Assault	58.30%
Larceny	17.00%
Motor Vehicle Theft	15.90%
All the above crimes	31.50%

Another significant aspect of evaluating law enforcement priorities concerns the growing economic impact of what is referred to as “white-collar crime.” This is a broad term for what are essentially non-violent theft, including such crimes as fraud, identity theft, embezzlement, and securities fraud. While a great deal of media attention is devoted to law enforcement responses to street crimes, the economic impact of these crimes is dwarfed by the magnitude of white-collar crime, which is conservatively estimated to have an impact of 10 times the value of street crimes.

Marijuana arrests also divert law enforcement and criminal justice system resources from possession and sales offenses involving other illicit drugs. In 2007, marijuana arrests were 55% of all drug arrests in Virginia. Other drugs such as cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and synthetic narcotics such as Oxycontin present far more serious threats to both individuals and the public. These other illegal drugs also have far more severe dependence liabilities than marijuana. Here is a summary of drug arrests in Virginia for 2007:

Drug	Arrests	Pct.
Opiates/Cocaine	10,696	30%
Marijuana	19,726	55%
Synthetic Narcotics	983	3%
Other Dangerous Drugs	3,168	9%
All Illicit Drugs	35,748	100%

Marijuana in Virginia

The need to improve clearance rates for serious crime, to devote greater resources to white-collar crime, and to address the problems presented by more dangerous drugs all provide compelling reasons for society to reconsider whether the opportunity costs of marijuana law enforcement are acceptable.

c) Social Costs

Marijuana arrests have a disproportionate impact on two demographic groups – young people and minorities. In many cases an arrest for marijuana possession makes a criminal out of an otherwise law-abiding individual. It is not surprising that the majority of marijuana arrests involve teenagers and young adults given the popularity of marijuana use with younger age groups. However differences in the arrest rates between whites and blacks cannot be explained by differences in marijuana use. In 2007, for example, 10.5% of whites used marijuana in the last year while 12.2% of blacks reported such use. For marijuana use in the last month, the comparable figures were 6% of whites and 7.2% of blacks. These figures indicate that marijuana use by blacks is about 20% more prevalent than use by whites. While this is a statistically significant difference, it does not explain why arrest rates for marijuana possession for blacks are three times higher nationally than for whites. For example, the arrest rate per 100,000 for blacks in 2007 was 598, while for whites the arrest rate was 195.

Here are selected 2007 marijuana possession arrest rates for Virginia:

Group	Pct of Arrests	Arrest Rate per 100,000
All individuals	100%	228
Males age 15 to 19	26%	1,704
Females age 15 to 19	5%	303
Males age 20 to 24	27%	1,674
Females age 20 to 24	5%	315
Whites	55%	170
Blacks	45%	509

4) Marijuana Use

There were 633,000 annual marijuana users in Virginia during 2007, of which 411,000 reported marijuana use in the past month. As noted above, the number of annual marijuana users in Virginia increased from 572,000 in 2003 to 633,000 in 2007. This was an average annualized change of 2.05% per year. The number of monthly marijuana users increased from 352,000 in 2003 to 411,000 in 2007, which produced an average annualized change of 3.15%.

There is general consensus that minors should not use alcohol, marijuana, or tobacco. According to the most recent (2007) data 13.30% or 82,000 youths aged 12 to 17 in Virginia used marijuana in the past year. Of these, 7.80% (of the total population of this age group) or 48,000 youths used marijuana in the past month. Marijuana's illegal status did not prevent these youths from having access to marijuana. Indeed, most teenagers report that marijuana is fairly easy to obtain. One of the reasons marijuana remains easy for youths to obtain is the profit incentive created by the illegal market. Simply put, teenagers make money by selling marijuana to other youths, which increases the availability of marijuana among teens. In this way, marijuana's illegality makes it more widely and readily available to teenagers.

Marijuana in Virginia

Here are data on the prevalence and population estimates for marijuana use by various age groups in Virginia:

Past Month Marijuana Use (2007)

Age	Pct.	Pop.
Age 12 to 17	7.80%	48,000
Age 18 to 25	18.50%	147,000
Age 26 +	4.50%	215,000
Total	6.60%	411,000

Past Year Marijuana Use (2007)

Age	Pct.	Pop.
Age 12 to 17	13.30%	82,000
Age 18 to 25	29.70%	237,000
Age 26 +	6.50%	313,000
Total	10.10%	633,000

5) County-Level Rankings

Most marijuana arrests are made by local police agencies. Individual agencies and officers exercise considerable discretion regarding law enforcement, not just for marijuana offenses, but for a number of offenses. The number of marijuana arrests also varies because of differences in local populations and the local prevalence of marijuana use. Furthermore, some areas have exceptionally high arrest rates for marijuana because they attract large visitor populations. Because arrest rates are calculated by dividing the number of arrests by the local resident population, numerous arrests of visitors to the area artificially inflate the local arrest rate. For a town with a relatively small population, the arrest of several people driving through the town or on a nearby highway (such as an interstate) can produce a comparatively high arrest rate for marijuana possession.

College towns may have large arrest rates for marijuana offenses because they have larger resident populations of young adults, among whom marijuana use is more prevalent than in older populations. On the other hand, college towns may have lower arrest rates for marijuana possession, for example, because of the discretionary policies of local police agencies.

Similarly, areas with large concentrations of African-Americans may have higher arrest rates for marijuana possession than other areas because law enforcement agencies throughout the United States consistently arrest more blacks for marijuana possession than whites.

Areas such as beach towns, ski resorts, and natural resource areas also exhibit relatively high marijuana arrest rates because they attract numerous visitors, including large numbers of young adults.

Finally, some areas have larger arrest rates for marijuana possession simply because marijuana use is popular among the local residents; local police agencies have aggressive enforcement policies, or both.

County level marijuana possession arrest rates should be compared against the benchmark provided by the statewide arrest rate of 228 in Virginia for 2007. The following tables provide the leading counties in

Marijuana in Virginia

Virginia for marijuana possession arrests, marijuana possession arrest rates, the possession arrest rates for males aged 15 to 19, and the possession arrest rates for blacks:

Virginia City and County Leaders in Marijuana Possession Arrests (2007)

Virginia Beach city	1,528
Prince William	1,229
Newport News city	1,081
Chesterfield	950
Chesapeake city	859

Virginia City and County Leaders in Marijuana Possession Arrest Rates (2007)

Emporia city	1,106
Bedford city	949
Radford city	817
Colonial Heights city	744
Roanoke city	700

Virginia City and County Leaders in Marijuana Possession Arrest Rates, Males Aged 15 to 19 (2007)

Emporia city	8,695
Manassas Park city	7,602
Bedford city	7,517
Norton city	7,281
Staunton city	5,597

Virginia City and County Leaders in Marijuana Possession Arrest Rates of Blacks (2007)

Colonial Heights city	2,465
Bland	1,573
Roanoke city	1,524
Williamsburg city	1,461
Rockbridge	1,454

6) Drug Treatment Admission Trends

Data on drug treatment admissions is often used to justify devoting law enforcement resources to making marijuana arrests. The argument is two-fold. First, the number of marijuana-related admissions to drug treatment facilities is offered as evidence that marijuana is a dangerous drug. Second, marijuana arrests are justified because they force people to get treatment.

There are a number of flaws to this argument. Alcohol is also responsible for a large proportion of drug treatment admissions, however regulation is widely recognized as the most effective policy for

Marijuana in Virginia

restricting access and reducing prohibition related crime. Furthermore, despite well-deserved public concern over drug abuse and a general consensus that it should be reduced, drug abuse is not a crime. The legal basis for drug laws is that the manufacture, distribution, sale, and possession of drugs are illegal. It is unconstitutional to criminalize illness, mental health problems, or drug dependency in the United States. Alcoholism, for example, is not illegal. Instead we hold alcoholics legally accountable for their conduct, such as being drunk in public or driving while intoxicated. Forcing individuals into drug treatment programs is a dubious justification for making arrests of individuals for marijuana possession. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and other criminal justice professionals are not medically trained or certified to diagnose drug dependency and make discretionary decisions about individual treatment requirements.

However the most significant characteristic of marijuana-related drug treatment admissions is that a majority of them in Virginia are the result of referrals from the criminal justice system, often as an alternative to jail time as a sentence for a marijuana possession or sales offense. During 2007, there were 5,762 admissions for drug treatment services in Virginia. Of these, 60.76% were the result of referrals from the Virginia criminal justice system.

Here is a breakdown of the majority of 2007 drug treatment admissions in Virginia:

Primary Drug	Admissions	Pct.
Alcohol	11,584	36%
Marijuana	5,762	18%
Cocaine	5,179	16%
Synthetic Narcotics	1,515	5%
Methamphetamine	320	1%
All Admissions	31,781	100%

Sources:

Sentences for Marijuana Possession were obtained from: ImpacTeen Illicit Drug Team. Illicit drug policies: Selected laws from the 50 states. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2002. http://www.impactteen.org/generalarea_PDFs/IDTchartbook032103.pdf and updated from other sources. Rankings of sentences were calculated independently and are based on the maximum number of days allowed by state law for the listed quantities of marijuana. The overall ranking is based on a weighted index for the four quantity levels. The weighting used in this index was: 70% for penalties for 1 ounce and 10% each for the penalties for 2, 3, and 4 ounces.

All arrest and clearance data were obtained from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program. Data on drug use were obtained from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH); data on drug treatment admissions were obtained from the Treatment Episodes Data Set (TEDS). NSDUH and TEDS are compiled and published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Data on Criminal Justice Service costs were obtained from the Criminal Justice Expenditure and Employment Extracts Program (CJEE) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice. More information on source data for this report can be obtained at <http://www.drugscience.org/States/Notes.htm>