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As the use of Methamphetamines continues to be growing problem in Montana, our state legislature has succeeded in enacting several measures in an attempt to curb the use of these dangerous drugs. However, as penalties for possession of a much less dangerous drug, marijuana, are becoming increasingly more severe for violators, the stigma surrounding the possession of this drug is diverting both attention and resources away from the fight against much more lethal methamphetamines. The resources currently used to punish people for possessing marijuana should be re-allocated by decriminalizing the drug in order to further prevent the use of other dangerous drugs that pose a much greater threat.

For clarification, it is important to discern exactly what decriminalization would entail. As opposed to complete legalization, decriminalization simply removes the penalty of jail time for offenders so long as the drug is being used only for personal use, which means that the offender possesses less than one ounce of the substance. The penalty for such an offense under current Montana law is up to six months in prison and a \$100-\$500 fine. If decriminalized, possession would be treated much more like a minor traffic violation with a minimal fine instead a major offense that constitutes jail time. Decriminalization only applies to citizens over the age of 18, mirroring similar legislation mandating the age that a person is allowed to use tobacco products.

In 2002, the Montana Police Department reported an arrest total of 619 Montanans for possession of marijuana, constituting nearly 58% of drug arrests around the state. With the fight against meth becoming an increasingly important but difficult task, it's time our attention and resources were shifted to mirror the dangers of these drugs, not be squandered on less harmful drugs like marijuana.

This is not an issue of politics, nor an issue of health. As the British Medical Journal *The Lancet* stated in a 1995 issue: "The smoking of cannabis, even long term, is not harmful to health. Yet this widely-used substance is illegal just about everywhere. [...] Leaving politics aside, where is the harm in decriminalizing cannabis? There is none to the health of the consumers, and the criminal fraternity who depend for their succor on prohibition would hate it. Cannabis has become a political football, and one that governments continually duck. Like footballs, however, it bounces back. Sooner or later politicians will have to stop running scared and address the evidence: cannabis per se is not a hazard to society but driving it further underground may well be."