

Weed debates and root problems

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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I didn't vote for Amendment 64, which legalized marijuana for recreational use in my home state of Colorado. I had mixed feelings about it. When marijuana was legalized for medical use in 2000, the effect on my small mountain community wasn't something to celebrate. The majority of people who got licenses for medical marijuana [were young men under the age of 34](#). At least legalization for recreational use will put a stop to that farce.

In my two-stoplight town, two medical marijuana "dispensaries"—along with a paraphernalia shop and a "grow" shop—opened within five blocks of one another. In the four years that these facilities were open (two of the four are now closed), there were three robberies and one "contributing to the delinquency of a minor" crime associated with them. That's a lot for my small community.

At the same time, I am aware that our laws around marijuana are ineffective and that the "war on drugs" has had deeply damaging effects. I know that the 1980s' tighter drug laws led to one in five black men being locked up, in the establishment of what Michelle Alexander [has called](#) the "New Jim Crow." I am not opposed to changing the structure of these laws, nor am I opposed to legalization of marijuana on the whole, but I do not think legalization is anything close to a panacea. A great deal of structural, social and legal shifts will be necessary before any true, positive change can take place.

In [an interview](#) I did with Alexander last year, she reminded me that the New Jim Crow is not caused by legal structure alone—and that if we do not address it in a comprehensive form, it will simply reinvent itself:

If we were just to return to the incarceration rates of the 1970s, before the War on Drugs and the get-tough movement began, we would have to release four out of five of the people in prison today. A million people employed by the criminal justice system would lose their jobs. To talk in a serious way about ending the system means grappling with its scale.

But Alexander insists that this is not a legal problem in itself. It is fundamentally a problem of valuing the lives of some more than the lives of others. Changing the New Jim Crow, she says, “is going to require a new public consensus that the lives of poor kids in the ‘hood are equally valuable as the lives of the kids populating our college campuses.”

I cannot see how legalizing marijuana in Colorado addresses this problem. Meanwhile, I will certainly be curious to see how the new law affects my own neighborhood.