

# Every minute, someone gets arrested for marijuana possession in the U.S.

By [Christopher Ingraham](#) September 28 at 11:56 AM [Follow](#) [@\\_cingraham](#)

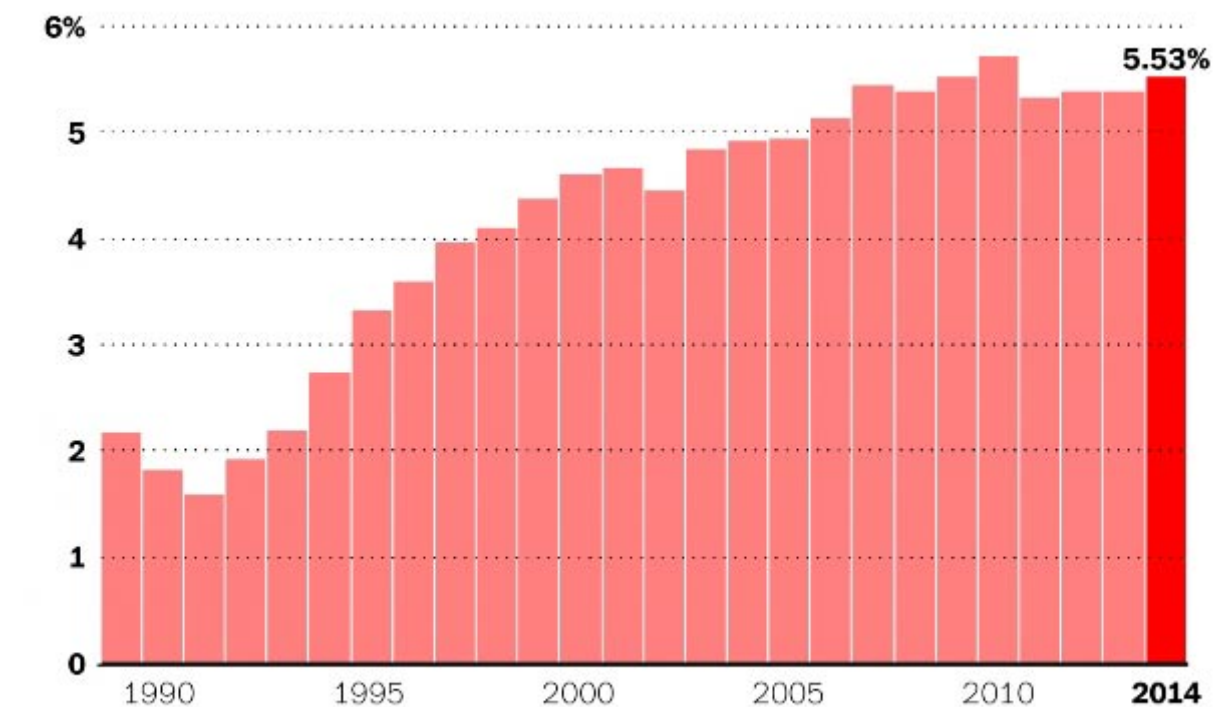


Growing marijuana can earn you a blue ribbon at the D.C. State Fair -- and an arrest record just about everywhere else. (Jonathan Newton/The Washington Post)

The nation's law enforcement agencies are still arresting people for marijuana possession at near record-high rates, according to the [latest national data](#) released today by the FBI. In 2014, at least 620,000 people were arrested for

simple pot possession -- **that's 1,700 people per day, or more than 1 per minute**. And that number is an undercount, because a handful of states either don't report arrest numbers to the FBI, or do so only on a limited basis.

Marijuana possession arrests as a share of all arrests, 1989-2014



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Source: FBI Unified Crime Statistics

Nationwide, more than 1 in 20 arrests were for simple marijuana possession. Twenty years ago, near the dawn of the drug war, fewer than 2 percent of arrests were for pot possession. But that rate rose steadily throughout the 1990s and 2000s, even as those years saw a shift toward less-restrictive marijuana laws at the state level.

2014 saw the first year of fully legal recreational marijuana markets in Washington state and Colorado. But even as marijuana arrests [plunged in those states](#), they crept upward at the national level -- suggesting that some

jurisdictions are ramping up their marijuana enforcement efforts even as a majority of the public embraces the notion of legal weed.

"It's unacceptable that police still put this many people in handcuffs for something that a growing majority of Americans think should be legal," said Tom Angell of the Marijuana Majority, a pro-legalization group, in a statement. "There's just no good reason that so much police time and taxpayer money is spent punishing people for marijuana when so many murders, rapes and robberies go unsolved." The FBI's figures show that over half of the nation's violent crimes, like murder, rape and assault, [went unsolved in 2014](#).

*[FBI director: We will collect and publish more information about fatal police shootings]*

Marijuana arrests can be costly for states and for the people arrested. The [American Civil Liberties Union estimates](#) that the typical marijuana arrest, excluding any costs of adjudication or detainment, costs about \$750. At 620,000 arrests, that means that states spent nearly half a billion dollars in 2014 just to arrest people for marijuana possession.

"These numbers refute the [myth](#) that nobody actually gets arrested for using marijuana," Mason Tvert of the Marijuana Policy Project, a pro-legalization group, said in a statement. "It's hard to imagine why more people were arrested for marijuana possession when fewer people than ever believe it should be a crime."

And the consequences of an arrest, even if it doesn't result in charges or jail time, [can be devastating](#). An arrest can mean missing a day of work and getting fired. It can [lead to a record](#) that prevents a person from finding work in the future. If a person is detained and unable to post bail, an arrest can mean [weeks in jail](#) waiting for trial. In extreme cases, an arrest [can end in death](#).

A number of states are planning to put marijuana legalization on the ballot in 2016, including [California](#), [Arizona](#) and [Nevada](#). If more states legalize and eliminate penalties for marijuana possession, the disparities in state-level marijuana enforcement may draw even more notice, given an activity that's legal in one state can lead to life-ruining consequences for somebody just across the state line. But unless Congress changes laws at the federal level, it looks like we'll be dealing with those consequences for the foreseeable future.