

Recreational pot laws may boost traffic deaths, studies say

By Lindsey Tanner
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Laws legalizing recreational marijuana may lead to more traffic deaths, two new studies suggest, although questions remain about how they might influence driving habits.

Previous research has had mixed results and the new studies, published Monday in JAMA Internal Medicine, can't prove that the traffic death increases they found were caused by marijuana use.

One study found an excess 75 traffic deaths per year after retail sales began in Colorado in January 2014, compared with states without similar laws. But it found no similar change in Washington state.

The other study looked at those states plus two others that allow recre-



Photo by Gillian Jones, The Berkshire Eagle via AP

In this May 25 file photo, agents Amanda Toma and Ashley Brodeur work with customers in the parking lot of cannabis purveyor Berkshire Roots in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Laws legalizing recreational marijuana may lead to more traffic deaths, two new studies suggest.

ational pot sales, Oregon and Alaska. If every state legalized recreational marijuana sales, an extra 6,800 people would die each year in traffic accidents, the researchers calculated.

They found an increase of 2 deaths per billion miles traveled compared with 20 states without those laws. That change was slightly higher than in the other study.

Both involved several years of traffic death data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration before and at least two years after retail sales of recreational pot began in

the states examined. Those sales dates ranged from 2014 to 2016.

The studies lack information on whether motorists were stoned when they crashed. Marijuana can remain in tissues for several days so even if toxicology tests detected it after a fatal crash, that wouldn't prove the driver was impaired, said co-author Magdalena Cerda, a New York University researcher.

It's possible that recreational pot laws might affect drivers' use of other drugs, including alcohol, she noted.

"That's an open question we need to answer in further research," Cerda said.

A journal editorial said more rigorous research is needed including studies on how often motorists use drugs.

"Clearly, introducing new legal intoxicants has the potential to ... lead to deaths due to impaired driving," the editorial said.

Recreational marijuana is legal in 11 states.

Variations in sales taxes, purchase limits and other aspects of marijuana laws in each state could play a role in any impact on traffic deaths. Also, when the two-state study was done, pot stores were more densely located in Colorado than in Washington, which could have made the drug more readily available, the authors said.

The four-state study, led by Dr. Russell Kamer of New York Medical College, accounted for jobless rates, maximum speed laws and seat-belt laws. But the authors said other factors they did not consider could have influenced traffic deaths.

Surging U.S. virus cases raise fear that progress is slipping

By Tamar Lush, Nathan Ellgren and Tammy Webber
Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Coronavirus cases in Florida surpassed 100,000 on Monday, part of an alarming surge across the South and West as states reopen for business and many Americans resist wearing masks or keeping their distance from others.

The disturbing signs in the Sunshine State as well as places like Arizona, Alabama, Texas and South Carolina — along with countries such as Brazil, India and Pakistan — are raising fears that the progress won after months of lockdowns is slipping away.

"It is snowballing," said Dr. Marc Boom, CEO and president of Houston Methodist Hospital, noting that the number of hospitalizations in the Texas Medical Center system that includes the hospital has more than doubled since Memorial Day. "If we don't do what we can RIGHT NOW as a community to stop the spread, the virus will take our choices away from us."

The number of newly confirmed coronavirus cases across the country per day has reached more than 26,000, up from about 21,000 two weeks ago, according to an Associated Press analysis of data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. The analysis looked at a seven-day rolling average through Sunday. Over 120,000 deaths in the U.S. have been blamed on the virus.

In Orlando, 152 coronavirus cases were linked to one bar near the University of Central Florida campus, said Dr. Raul Pino, a state health officer in the resort city.

"A lot of transmission happened there," Pino said. "People are very close. People are not wearing masks. People are drinking, shouting, dancing, sweating, kissing and hugging, all the things that happen in bars. And all those things that happen are not good for COVID-19."

Although he asked health officials to renew calls for people to wear masks and keep their distance, Gov. Ron DeSantis has not signaled he will retreat from reopening the state after three months of shutdowns that have damaged the economy.

Dr. Michael Ryan, the World Health Organization's emergencies chief, said that the outbreak is "definitely accelerating" in the U.S. and a number of other countries, dismissing the notion that the record daily levels of new COVID-19 cases simply reflect more testing. He noted that numerous countries have also noted

marked increases in hospital admissions and deaths.

"The epidemic is now peaking or moving towards a peak in a number of large countries," he warned.

Arizona, in particular, is seeing disturbing trends in several benchmarks, including the percentage of tests that prove positive for the virus. Arizona's is the highest in the nation.

The stat's positive test rate is at a seven-day average of 20.4%, well above the national average of 8.4% and the 10% level that public health officials say is a problem. When the positive test rate rises, it means that an outbreak is worsening — not just that more people are getting tested.

At Maryland's Fort Washington Medical Center on the outskirts of the nation's capital, workers described a scramble to find new beds, heart-breaking interactions with family members of critically ill patients and their frustration with Americans who do not believe the coronavirus threat is real.

"Everybody is out lounging on the beaches. Just thinking that it's over. And it's not," respiratory therapist Kevin Cole said. "It's far from being over. And unfortunately, it's those people that will keep this pandemic going."

Nearly 9 million people have been confirmed infected by the virus worldwide and about 470,000 have died, according to Johns Hopkins, though experts say the actual numbers are much higher because of limited testing and cases in which patients had no symptoms.

Amid the global surge, the head of WHO warned that world leaders must not politicize the outbreak but unite to fight it.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who has faced criticism from President Donald Trump, said during a videoconference for the Dubai-based World Government Summit that it took over three months for the world to see 1 million confirmed infections, but just eight days to see the most recent 1 million cases.

Tedros did not mention Trump by name or his determination to pull the United States out of the U.N. health agency but warned against "politicizing" the pandemic.

"The greatest threat we face now is not the virus itself, it's the lack of global solidarity and global leadership," he said. "We cannot defeat this pandemic with a divided world."

Companies around the world are racing to find a vaccine, and there is fierce debate over how to make sure it is distributed fairly.



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