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HEADLINE: THINK LEGALIZING POT WOULD BE HARMLESS? CONSIDER THIS

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BODY:

IT'S a never ending debate: Should the United States decriminalize marijuana?

Now, this hot topic has made its way into the Nashville mayoral race.

Candidate Jesse McDonald says the mayor's office should take the lead on decriminalizing marijuana in an effort to reduce crime.

Marijuana is no more dangerous than alcohol and tobacco, McDonald believes.

Three other candidates say, however, that they would oppose such a move, with one of them calling McDonald "nuts."

No matter how you feel about the issue, it's a debate that won't go away anytime soon. In the meantime, though, let me share some information on the issue that I received a couple of days ago.

Legalization of non-medical marijuana would pose a serious threat to millions of America's children, increasing their use of this dangerous drug a report released Tuesday stated. Besides that, it will take away critical support for the parents, teachers and others trying to steer kids away from drugs, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at New York's Columbia University, which conducted the report.

In 1996 (the latest year in which numbers are available) more teens age 19 and younger entered treatment for marijuana abuse and dependence than for any other drug, including alcohol, the report said.

In fact, nearly as many teens and children were admitted to treatment for marijuana as were admitted for abuse and dependence on all other substances combined, the report added.

Of the nearly 181,784 teens and children who entered treatment in 1996, nearly half 48.2% or 87,687 were admitted for abuse or addiction to marijuana alone; 19.3% (35,069) were admitted for alcohol with a secondary drug; 11.9% (21,594) for alcohol alone; 2.9% (5,323) for smoked cocaine; 2.4% for methamphetamines (4,354), and 2.3% (4,166) for heroin. More than half the teens in treatment for marijuana were between the ages of 15 and 17.

"Teens who smoke marijuana are playing a dangerous game of Russian roulette. The potential of marijuana as a dangerous drug for our children in and of itself, as a gateway to

other drug use and as a signal of trouble, is a matter of the most serious concern for American parents," said former Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr., CASA president and chairman.

"Teen experimentation with marijuana should not be considered a casual rite of passage."

The report recognizes that the determination of the medical value of marijuana should be made by physicians and scientists, but finds that any such determination has no relevance to prohibition of the general use of marijuana.

"Marijuana legalization proponents like to play doctor and prescribe marijuana by political referendum," Califano said. "Medical marijuana should not be the nose under the tent leading to the drug's general legalization, as some proponents hope, any more than the medical use of cocaine or opiates has been regarded as an opening move in the direction of general use of those drugs."

CASA's research has shown that a child who gets through age 21 without smoking, using marijuana or any other illegal drug, or abusing alcohol is virtually certain never to do so.

On the other hand, CASA officials say decriminalization of non-medical marijuana would increase use among the nation's teens and children, heightening the risk of physical and psychological dependence and the likelihood of children moving on to other illegal drugs, such as LSD, cocaine or heroin.

I don't know about you, but the CASA findings strengthen my belief that legalizing the use of non-medical marijuana would be a bad idea in the United States.

I could be wrong. But my main concern is saving our children, and I don't believe we can do that by saying it's OK to smoke dope.

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