

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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Dem introduces bill decriminalizing psychedelics, hopes to reverse some 'War on Drugs' impacts

BY: **JULIA FORREST** - SEPTEMBER 13, 2021 3:53 AM



Sen. Jeff Irwin at a Sen. Bernie Sanders rally in Ann Arbor, March 8, 2020 | Andrew Roth

Michigan Sen. Jeff Irwin (D-Ann Arbor) introduced legislation last week that would decriminalize the use of psilocybin and mescaline – two plants and fungi commonly found in psychedelics.

[Senate Bill 631](#), which was co-sponsored by state Sen. Adam Hollier (D-Detroit), would allow the possession, cultivation and delivery of the two types of psychedelics. Commercial

production or sales of entheogenic plants or fungi would still be illegal, but practitioners would be able to charge fees for counseling, spiritual guidance, or a related service if the service utilizes an entheogenic plant or fungus.

In an interview with the *Advance*, Irwin contended psychedelics provide several benefits and prohibition is a waste of time and resources.

“These substances have medicinal value, they have religious significance and they have a very low propensity for abuse,” Irwin said. “And so that’s why I’m proposing to decriminalize the substance because it really makes no sense to spend any time or money arresting people and turning their lives upside down.”

The trend in decriminalization efforts for psychedelics also comes after many states have legalized the recreational use of marijuana – another Schedule 1 drug. A majority of voters in Michigan [passed](#) Proposal 1 in 2018 which legalized recreational marijuana for those age 21 and older.

In Michigan, the Ann Arbor City Council [passed](#) a resolution in September 2020 decriminalizing the use of psychedelics. The city also [passed](#) a resolution designating September as Entheogenic Plants and Fungi Awareness Month. In Grand Rapids, a [vote](#) is likely to happen this year as to if the use, possession, growing or gifting of psychoactive plants and fungi should be decriminalized in the city.

Other major U.S. cities, like [Denver](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#), have decriminalized the use of psychedelics.

There’s also been movement at the state level. Oregon was the [first](#) state to legalize psilocybin therapy in 2020, In California, lawmakers are [moving closer to passing](#) a bill that would decriminalize psychedelics in the state.

However, reform at the federal level has stalled. The Democratic-led U.S. House of Representatives voted against a proposal 140-285 in July that aimed to [amend](#) a spending bill to expand funding for research related to the medical use of psychedelics. But a report attached to spending bills in July, the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies [urged](#) the need for psychedelic research to be conducted on how those drugs can benefit veterans suffering from mental illness.

Irwin said his proposed legislation would build off of decriminalization efforts in Ann Arbor and other communities to ensure no one is criminally penalized for utilizing the drugs.

Irwin also said the bill will contribute to efforts to reverse the effects of the War on Drugs – which has [disproportionately](#) affected communities of color since the 1970s. Federal restrictions on psychedelics [began](#) in 1970 after seeing an increase in psychedelic use in the 1960s.

A participant holds up a sign at the 43rd annual Hash Bash rally in Ann Arbor, MI April 5, 2014. | iStockphoto

“There are efforts in other communities across the state to decriminalize these substances and to stop wasting any police resource [and] turning people’s lives upside down over it,” Irwin said. “I’m really proud to be kind of starting up this conversation at the state level of why is it that we’re continuing to engage this fail in government policy of prohibition? Why are we continuing to prosecute the war on drugs in ways that don’t help us and lead to mass incarceration?”

Psychedelics are currently **classified** as a Schedule-1 drug in the U.S., meaning the drug has “no currently accepted medical use in the United States, a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision, and a high potential for abuse.”

However, recent studies have shown that psychedelics **may help** patients with crippling mental illnesses such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and addiction. In a study published last year, it was **found** that 71% of people with a major depressive disorder had a more than 50% reduction in symptoms within a month of taking psilocybin. Half of the participants even entered remission after using psilocybin for a month.

Irwin emphasized that the legislation will rid people of the ugly choice of having to choose between prioritizing their health and safety or following the law.

“Fixing that for those people and giving our institutions an opportunity to research and learn more about why these substances work for some people can be a great benefit to many people who are struggling with mental illness,” Irwin said. “I think there are a number of benefits that can come out of [this] legislation.”

Myc Williams, spokesperson for Decriminalize Nature Ann Arbor, spoke to the *Advance* about the bill’s ability to decriminalize the use of psychedelics. Decriminalize Nature Ann Arbor is an organization that focuses on helping neighboring towns decriminalize psychedelics while also pushing for decriminalization at a state level.

Williams said the use of psychedelics goes beyond just having medicinal value, but can also change an individual’s everyday life. He also highlighted that the use of psychedelics has been used in cultural and spiritual practices for centuries.

“People have found spiritual purpose [and] have found better practices in their daily life,” Williams said. “Whether it be appreciation for the little things in life, family, and nature. And so this isn’t strictly a medical thing, this isn’t strictly a spiritual thing, but this is for the well-being of every individual and larger communities across the state.”

Research institutions such as John Hopkins University and the University of California, Berkeley, have also recently opened centers dedicated to psychedelic research. Studies coming out of research institutions have indicated that psychedelics can be safely administered and help people with a myriad of mental health issues.

In a 2006 study at John Hopkins University, it was **found** that 67% of participants who received psilocybin versus a placebo “rated the experience with psilocybin to be either the single most meaningful experience of his or her life or among the top five most meaningful experiences of his or her life.”

Williams went on to praise the role research has in destigmatization and decriminalization efforts, highlighting that recent studies examining the use of psychedelics have “overwhelmingly [been] in support of changing the laws around these substances.”

“To deny that relationship with nature is in and of itself criminal if you ask me,” Williams said. “All this [bill] really does is [protect] accessibility... because [psychedelics] are safe. Because they don’t require a doctor’s supervision. And when the medical model comes, [it will come], but at least we’ll have protected the people of Michigan’s access to these substances first.”

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