

My name is Jennifer B. Unger, Ph.D. I am a Professor of Population and Public Health Sciences, Vice Chair for Faculty Development, and Director of the Ph.D. program in Health Behavior Research at the University of Southern California. I am qualified to testify on legalization of cannabis in Pennsylvania because I have worked in tobacco and cannabis control research in California since 1998. The California experience with cannabis legalization demonstrates some challenges that Pennsylvania might face.

California legalized cannabis for adult recreational use in 2016, and retail cannabis stores were allowed to open in 2018. Retail stores could operate legally if they obtained a state license and followed rules for age verification, THC content, and packaging. Unfortunately, numerous unlicensed retailers also appeared, and California did not have the enforcement resources to shut them down. Unlicensed retailers are more likely to sell to minors, sell high-THC products, and sell products without childproof packaging. The presence of these unlicensed retailers is dangerous to youth.

The state law legalized cannabis retailers statewide. However, individual jurisdictions such as counties and cities could pass ordinances banning cannabis retailers. We noticed that many high socioeconomic status jurisdictions banned cannabis retailers, whereas low socioeconomic status jurisdictions viewed cannabis as a revenue opportunity and did not ban it. As of 2024, 44% of California cities and counties allow at least one type of cannabis business, and 56% do not. This has created a patchwork of regulations, where residents of a non-cannabis jurisdiction can drive a short distance and purchase cannabis in a neighboring jurisdiction. This concentrates the revenue (but also the crime, litter, etc.) in low socioeconomic status locations.

I wish to highlight two of my published research studies that are relevant to Pennsylvania's decision about whether to legalize cannabis. In the first study (Unger et al., 2020), we used data from the California Board of Cannabis Control and Weedmaps to map the locations of all licensed and unlicensed cannabis retailers throughout California. We merged these data with racial/ethnic and socioeconomic data from the US Census. We identified 448 licensed retailers and 662 unlicensed retailers. Compared with neighborhoods with only licensed retailers, neighborhoods with only unlicensed retailers had higher proportions of Hispanics and African Americans and lower proportions of non-Hispanic whites. Neighborhoods with both licensed and unlicensed retailers had higher proportions of African Americans, Asian Americans, and people living in poverty, relative to neighborhoods with only licensed retailers. Unlicensed retailers were disproportionately located in unincorporated areas and jurisdictions that allow cannabis retailers. This indicates that minority and low-income populations in California are disproportionately exposed to unlicensed cannabis retailers, potentially exacerbating health disparities by selling unregulated products or selling to minors.

We then collected survey data from 1406 adolescents throughout California to ask about their cannabis use. We found that adolescents who lived near cannabis retailers were more likely to use cannabis than those who lived farther away, even after controlling for socioeconomic differences. For every additional 5 driving miles to the nearest cannabis retailer, the risk of past-month cannabis use was reduced by 3.6% (Albers et al., 2023). We also found that adolescents who lived in jurisdictions that allowed cannabis retailers were significantly more likely to report past-month cannabis use and easy access to cannabis (Rogers et. al, 2022).

Our findings indicate that proximity to cannabis retailers, especially unlicensed retailers but also licensed retailers, is a risk factor for cannabis use among adolescents. To prevent this, I recommend the following:

1. Pennsylvania should limit youth access to cannabis retailers by placing licensed retailers far from residential areas, schools, and parks and strongly enforcing age verification practices.

2. Pennsylvania should devote significant resources to enforcement so that unlicensed retailers can be detected and shut down promptly.
3. Pennsylvania should consider health equity in awarding licenses to make sure low-income and minority areas do not become saturated with cannabis retailers.

References

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