

U.S. NEWS

California moves closer to decriminalizing psychedelic drugs

An initiative that would legalize magic mushrooms was recently approved for signature-gathering.



— A vendor bags psilocybin mushrooms at a cannabis marketplace in Los Angeles in 2019.

Richard Vogel / AP file

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By Dennis Romero

SAN DIEGO – California legalized medical marijuana 25 years ago when voters approved an initiative that eventually helped to overturn cannabis prohibition in [all but three states](#) today.

The legalization movement that brought upmarket marijuana shops to Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco is now focused on psychedelic drugs. A voter initiative to decriminalize magic mushrooms was recently approved for signature-gathering, and a legislative proposal is set to be considered next year.

Some in the decriminalization movement say the legalization of psychedelic drugs is inevitable, pointing to [Oregon, where voters](#) approved magic mushroom decriminalization last year, and [Denver](#) and [Oakland](#), California, which had passed similar laws in 2019.

"I believe it is possible that eventually, a critical mass or even a majority of states will legalize or decriminalize some or all of these psychedelics," said Ismail L. Ali, acting director of policy and advocacy at Santa Cruz-based Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, in an email.

The founding of MAPS by Harvard Ph.D. Rick Doblin predated California's medical marijuana law by 10 years. The nonprofit has funded [ecstasy research](#) that in spring showed the drug, when paired with one-on-one therapy, could bring relief to those suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

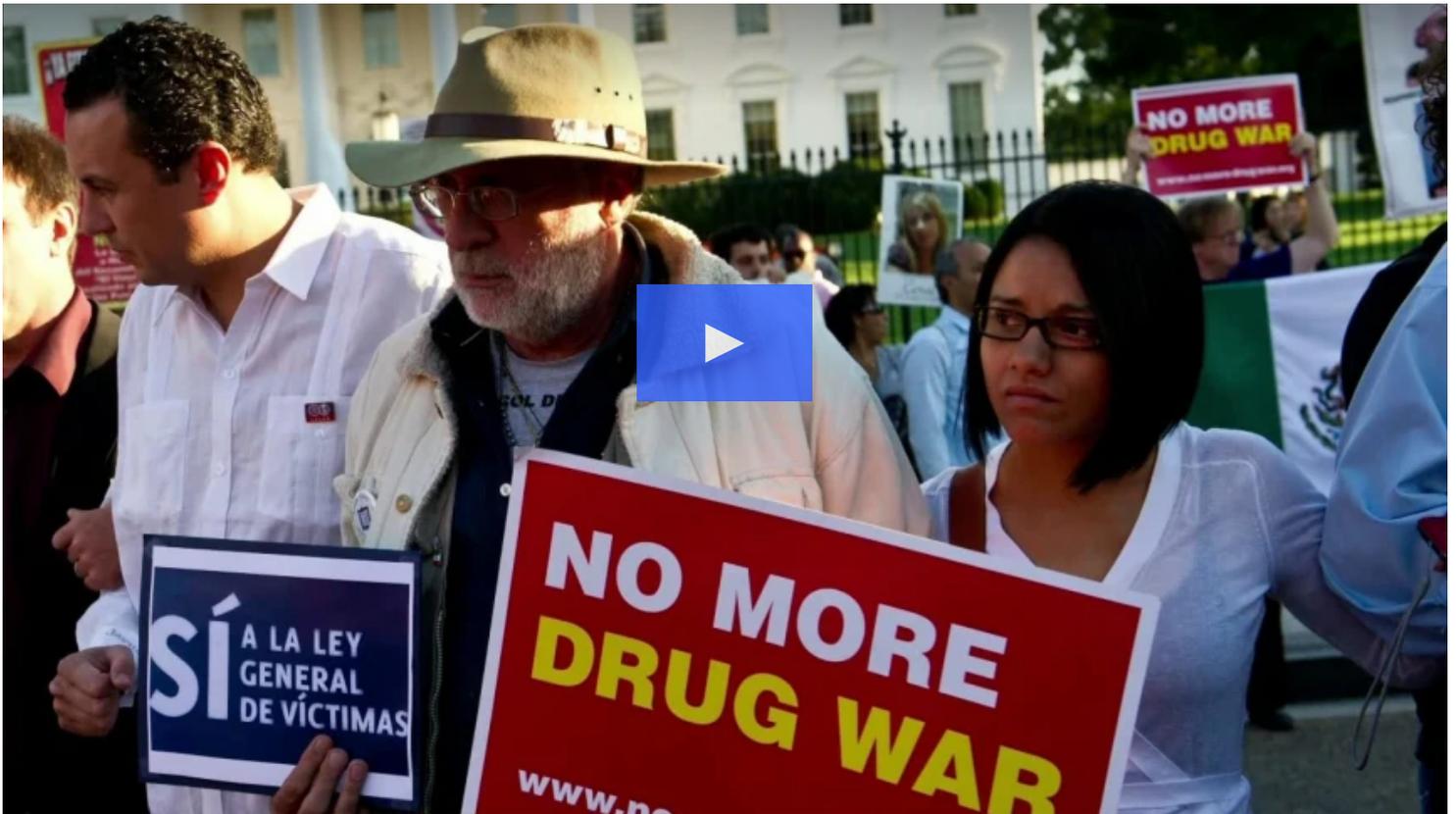
Ali said much of the hard work toward a goal of decriminalization is still ahead.

"Policy change regarding psychedelics is not inevitable," he said. "We are in an early and sensitive phase in the process, and much remains to be seen in how different states navigate the emerging policy landscape."

On Thursday, the state attorney general approved signature-gathering for a [proposed initiative](#) that seeks to decriminalize magic mushrooms for those 21 and older. Proponents are aiming for the 2022 ballot, but they face the challenge of [millions of dollars](#) in fundraising typically required to gather enough signatures to qualify for voter consideration.

The proposal's campaign director, Ryan Munevar, did not respond to an email request for comment and declined to be interviewed by phone.

The initiative's backers imagine psilocybin, the psychoactive metabolite found in magic mushrooms, sold in a variety of stores. But the proposal's [website](#) warns, "On a practical level, some businesses might be unwilling to sell psilocybin due to the fact that psilocybin would remain [a Schedule I controlled substance](#) under federal law."



proposed [legislation by Sen. Scott Wiener](#) that would allow people 21 and older to hold and share small amounts of psychedelic drugs without fear of arrest.

Those drugs include psilocybin, psilocyn, ecstasy, LSD, DMT, mescaline (excluding peyote) and ibogaine.

"We believe that Senator Wiener's legislation is *a* way forward," Ali said. "It offers the state an incremental step away from criminalization."

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The proposed law passed key hurdles during this year's legislative session, and Wiener said he will bring it back next year after he has had a chance to educate Assembly members and the

public "to ensure the bill's success," according to a statement from his office.

Opponents might use the time to argue that decriminalization is a slippery slope to greater drug use, a notion discounted by researchers and even by the federal government which, in [a 2018 analysis of studies on the "gateway drug" theory](#), concluded there was "no causal link between cannabis use and the use of other illicit drugs."

"First marijuana, now hallucinogens and tomorrow heroin," said Kevin Sabet, who advised three presidential administrations on drugs and now heads the group, Smart Approaches to Marijuana. "This is part of a strategy to legalize all drugs, and people will suffer as a result."

Decriminalization proponents disagree, but they do say psychedelic drugs should come with a healthy respect for the sometimes mind-blowing nature of the substances.

MAPS would like to see "drug education and harm reduction alongside decriminalization," Ali said.

Matthew W. Johnson, associate director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic & Consciousness Research, said he favors decriminalization but added that it comes with "risks."

[He said](#) last year that unfettered access brings him "real concerns about very real risks of psychotic disorders – what people refer to as a bad trip."

In an interview Friday, Johnson said decriminalization should be paired with more research and public education regarding the drugs' affects.

"If someone's using, the best way to deal with it is not to give them a felony or misdemeanor," said Johnson, who teaches psychiatry and behavioral sciences. "I am supportive of decriminalizing drugs in general, but that doesn't mean I want to encourage their use." 

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