

Pot, race and justice

A report on arrests shows alarming inequity

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Nassau and Suffolk counties have the highest rates of low-level marijuana possession arrests in the state outside New York City, impacting minorities significantly more often than white people on Long Island, a pro-legalization coalition has found.

In Suffolk, blacks and Latinos accounted for 66 percent of marijuana possession arrests in 2017, and were 29 percent of the population, according to a report by Start SMART NY, which is made up of community-based groups pressing for criminal justice reform in New York.

Whites were 69 percent of the population in Suffolk and accounted for 32 percent of marijuana arrests.

In Nassau in 2017, blacks and Latinos accounted for 60 percent of arrests, and were 30 percent of the population. Whites, who were about 70 percent of the population, accounted for 40 percent of marijuana possession arrests.

In 2017, there were 23,086 peo-



Doug Greene of Empire State NORML and Start SMART NY, which released the report, in Mineola.

ple arrested statewide for low-level marijuana possession, of whom 81 percent were black or Latino, according to the report.

Overall, there were 110 arrests per 100,000 residents in Suffolk and 130 arrests per 100,000 in Nassau in 2017, the report said.

"Marijuana arrest rates for nonwhites was four times the arrest rates for whites across Long Island," said Lisa Tyson, director of the Long Island Pro-

gressive Coalition, one of the advocacy groups. "Racial disparities are not only seen in arrests but they are also presented in prosecutions and how cases are charged by district attorney offices and carrying them into the courtroom."

The report comes as Long Island municipalities are holding hearings and town hall meetings to consider the implications of legalization in their communities.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has introduced a \$300 million plan to legalize recreational sale and use of marijuana statewide. He says legalization would help end "needless and unjust criminal convictions" for possession, which he said have affected minority communities disproportionately.

On Tuesday, a proposal introduced in Suffolk to opt out of Cuomo's plan drew mixed reactions from a nearly dozen resi-

dents who testified at a public hearing.

Some backed marijuana legalization and opposed a measure sponsored by Suffolk County Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga). They said legalization would make marijuana products safer, reduce criminal influence and produce revenues needed for government services.

"Legalizing it makes sense by providing purity controls we don't have now," said Mary Mulcahy of Greenport.

Others drew from personal experience in expressing concerns about the impact on young people.

"I've watched people with my own eyes with impaired memories, their coordination is off and they have difficulties speaking," said Angela Huneault of Flanders.

Cuomo wants the State Legislature to adopt legalization as part of the state budget by April 1. Counties and cities with populations of more than 100,000 could opt out of the legalization program.

But Jeffrey Reynolds, president of Mineola-based Family and Children's Association which runs addiction treatment centers, said, "while the continued disparities associated with marijuana arrests are disconcerting to say the least, it's not clear that legalization eliminates racial disparities in the criminal justice system."

U.S. deficit up 77%, fed by tax cuts, spending

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The federal budget deficit ballooned rapidly in the first four months of the fiscal year amid falling tax revenue and higher spending, the Treasury Department said Tuesday, posing a new challenge for the White House and Congress as they prepare for a number of budget battles.

The deficit grew 77 percent in the first four months of the fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, compared with the same period one year before, Treasury said.

The total deficit for the four month period was \$310 billion, Treasury said, up from \$176 bil-

lion for the same period one year earlier.

"It's big tax cuts combined with big increases in spending when they already had big deficits," said former Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-N.D.). "So guess what, it's craziness!"

When Republicans seized control of the House of Representatives during the Obama administration, lawmakers and White House officials embarked on a number of strained negotiations to try to reduce the gap between spending and tax revenue. During the Trump administration, there have not been any similar discussions,

and Trump has largely pushed for an agenda of tax cuts and spending increases that has grown the deficit markedly.

Tax revenue for October 2018 through January 2019 fell \$19 billion, or 2 percent, Treasury said. It noted a major reduction in corporate tax payments over the first four months of the fiscal year, falling close to 25 percent, or \$17 billion.

As part of the 2017 tax cut law, the tax rate paid by corporations was lowered from 35 percent to 21 percent.

Spending, meanwhile, increased 9 percent over the same period.

The biggest increases were

for military programs, which saw a 12 percent increase, and Medicare, which saw a 16 percent increase.

The Congressional Budget Office has projected that the deficit this year will reach close to \$900 billion because the government spends so much more money than it brings in through revenue.

The White House next week is expected to propose a new budget plan for the fiscal year that begins in October, and Democrats are working on spending plans of their own. So far, there has been little effort to reconcile differences between the parties, and neither

has shown much interest in addressing the widening budget deficit.

The White House plan will propose cutting a number of domestic programs by at least 5 percent, including things like environmental protection, education and foreign aid, according to Trump administration officials who have previewed some of the plans. It will also propose adhering to caps on military and nonmilitary programs put in place several years ago, but it will simultaneously propose boosting military spending in an uncapped program as a way to divert more money to the military.