TOOLS FOR DEBATE: US Federal Government Data on Cannabis Prohibition

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A report of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy
OVERVIEW OF REPORT

- Draws upon 20 years of data from US federal government funded surveillance systems
- Summarizes data on impacts of cannabis prohibition, specifically cannabis seizures and cannabis-related arrests
- Assesses the assumption that increased law enforcement funding reduces cannabis-related harms, using markers of:
  » Cannabis potency
  » Cannabis price
  » Availability
  » Rates of use
- Describes evidence-based regulatory tools that may reduce cannabis-related harms if cannabis were legalized
- Has been peer-reviewed and has been endorsed by 65 MDs and PhDs in 28 countries
PROHIBITION FUNDING, CANNABIS SEIZURES AND ARRESTS

- Between 1981 and 2002, the United States government spent $217 billion (USD) on their anti-drug efforts.
Figure 1. United States Federal Drug Control Budget, 1981 - 2002

Source: US Office of National Drug Control Policy
• Between 1981 and 2002, the United States government spent $217 billion (USD) on their anti-drug efforts
• Between 1990 and 2006, cannabis seizures increased by more than 400%
Figure 3. Annual Cannabis Seizures in the United States, 1990 - 2006

Source: US Bureau of Justice Statistics; US National Drug Threat Assessment
• Between 1981 and 2002, the United States government spent $217 billion (USD) on their anti-drug efforts
• Between 1990 and 2006, cannabis seizures increased by more than 400%
• From 1990 to 2007, the number of cannabis-related arrests per year more than doubled
Figure 2. Cannabis-Related Arrests in the United States, 1990 - 2007*

*Includes arrests for possession, sale or production of cannabis

Source: US Bureau of Justice Statistics
PROHIBITION FUNDING, CANNABIS SEIZURES AND ARRESTS

• Between 1981 and 2002, the United States government spent $217 billion (USD) on their anti-drug efforts
• Between 1990 and 2006, cannabis seizures increased by more than 400%
• From 1990 to 2007, the number of cannabis-related arrests per year more than doubled
• The cannabis possession arrest rate for African-Americans is 300% higher than for whites, even though US government studies show African-Americans use cannabis at lower rates
How have cannabis prohibition expenditures, arrests and seizures impacted cannabis-related harms?
• Between 1990 and 2007, the potency of cannabis increased by 145%
Figure 4. Estimated Purity of Cannabis in the United States, 1990 - 2007

Source: University of Mississippi Cannabis Potency Monitoring Project
Between 1990 and 2007, the potency of cannabis increased by 145%.
During this time, there was also a 58% reduction in the average price of cannabis.
Figure 5. Estimated Price of Cannabis in the United States, 1990 - 2007

*Prices adjusted for CPI and expressed in 2007 USD

Source: US Drug Enforcement Agency STRIDE surveillance system
Percentage change of drug enforcement budget, cannabis potency and cannabis price in the United States, 1990 - 2002
Between 1990 and 2007, the potency of cannabis increased by 145%.
During this time, there was also a 58% reduction in the average price of cannabis.
Yet, over the last 30 years, cannabis has remained “almost universally available to American 12th graders”.
Approximately 60% of school-aged US youth who use cannabis report having obtained their last used cannabis for free.
Rates of cannabis use among American youth do not decrease when there is increased funding for cannabis prohibition:

Annual prevalence of cannabis use among US 12th graders:
- 27% in 1990
- 32% in 2008

Annual prevalence of cannabis use among US 19 to 28 year olds:
- 26% in 1990
- 33% in 2008
Government officials argue that rates of use would be higher if cannabis were legal.

Comparisons between the US and the Netherlands, where cannabis is de facto legalized, indicate that the US has a lifetime rate of cannabis use more than double that observed in the Netherlands.
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF CANNABIS PROHIBITION

• Making cannabis illegal enriches organized crime and drives up levels of violence as street gangs and cartels compete for drug market profits
• In Mexico, over 28,000 people have died in the drug war since 2006
• US government reports estimate that 60% of Mexican drug cartel revenue comes from cannabis
“As a nation, we have been responsible for the murder of literally hundreds of thousands of people at home and abroad by fighting a war that should never have been started and can be won, if at all, only by converting the United States into a police state.”

Milton Friedman

US Economist and Nobel Laureate
**POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF A REGULATED MARKET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Potential benefits of a regulated market for cannabis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Availability</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Drug market violence</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Organized crime</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Law enforcement resources</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Tax revenue</strong></td>
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### Table 2: Models and mechanisms for reducing cannabis harms in a regulated market

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prescription or permit system</th>
<th>Prescriptions or permits could be issued to individual purchasers, similar to systems in place at some medical cannabis dispensaries.(^{50})</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Licensing system</td>
<td>Cannabis dispensaries could be issued conditional licences requiring compliance with regulatory guidelines.(^{46, 50})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purchasing controls</td>
<td>Taxation (i.e., increasing consumer price barriers) has been shown to affect levels of alcohol and tobacco use and could be applicable to cannabis.(^{50-52, 54, 55, 61})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales restrictions</td>
<td>Implementing age restrictions, similar to tobacco and alcohol regulations, could limit access to cannabis among youth.(^{46, 51})</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Limiting days and hours of sale of alcohol has been shown to affect levels of alcohol use and could affect rates of cannabis use.(^{50, 52, 61})</td>
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<td>Alcohol outlet density has been associated with rates of alcohol use and hence limiting cannabis outlet density could limit rates of use.(^{52, 61})</td>
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<td>Restrictions on bulk sales as employed in the Netherlands, where purchases are restricted to 5 grams, could help restrict diversion to minors.(^{46, 50})</td>
</tr>
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### EVIDENCE-BASED TOOLS FOR REGULATION

| Restrictions on use | Regulatory policies that affect the location or circumstances of use and allow for limited use in designated places, such as the Dutch coffee shop model for cannabis, could limit uncontrolled and “public nuisance” use.  

Strict regulations would prohibit driving or operating machinery while impaired.  

Marketing | Strict regulations on marketing and product branding would reduce exposure to advertising, which is known to affect rates of alcohol and tobacco use.  

Packaging | Tamper-proof packaging, standard labelling on content, factual health warnings, and no on-pack branding or marketing would help regulate cannabis use.  

Reducing harm | Regulated and controlled availability of lesser-strength substances reduces the illegal market for and use of higher potency substances, as has occurred with the regulation of alcohol.  

Opportunities should be explored to change patterns of use towards non-smoked cannabis. |
“We need at least to consider and examine forms of controlled legalization of drugs.”

George Shultz

*Secretary of State under US President Ronald Reagan*
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