

A person wearing a maroon shirt and handcuffs is shown from the chest up. They are holding a small, clear plastic bag filled with dried green cannabis buds in their left hand and a single, vibrant green cannabis leaf in their right hand. The background is blurred, showing a light-colored wall and a wooden door handle.

# Research report for ECOSOC

## **Examining the relationship between Legalization of Marijuana and Drug Related Crime**

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## Introduction

Cannabis (or Cannabis sativa L.) is a psychoactive drug which is the main component in the production of marijuana. When marijuana is consumed, most popularly by smoking, its effects vary from altered senses to increased appetite. Over centuries, governments have waged a 'war on drugs' mostly impacting the markets for cannabis production and consumption. The drug often is seen as connoting criminal behavior. The earliest prohibition of the drug was seen in Joneima, Arabia back in 1378. Regardless, this war on drugs has not terminated marijuana consumption, and some even argue it has increased it. More recently, marijuana has been slowly starting to be legalized for medicinal and recreational use in multiple countries over the last century.

This sudden legalization of cannabis products has sparked a large global debate regarding the regulation of the drug. Theoretically, the legalization of the consumption and distribution of cannabis should reduce drug-related crime, however, this requires international agreements. For example, a country legalizing cannabis consumption makes it very easy for neighboring countries' population to consume the drug, this is known as weed tourism and it is a known phenomenon in places such as Amsterdam in The Netherlands, should this remain legal?

## Key terms

- **Marijuana:** Marijuana is a product made from the crushed and dried up leaves from the Cannabis plant. The terms Marijuana and Cannabis will be used interchangeably throughout this report as their meaning does not differ enormously.
- **Drug-Related Crime:** Drug-related crime is defined as crime which involves the possession, manufacturing, distribution as well as crimes which are committed under the influence of drugs 'with potential for abuse.'
- **War on drugs:** A period of time (mostly often associated with the USA) where the governments imposed large penalties on drugs. Many argue this "war" did not help to reduce consumption.
- **Medicinal use:** Medicinal use refers to the use of cannabis for purposes which are medical. For medicinal use, mostly CBD (one of the two main compounds of cannabis) will be used as it does not give a 'high' (psychoactive effects). Cannabis



for medicinal use has been much more normalized and legalized than recreational use.


- **Recreational use:** Recreational use refers to use of the drug for non-medicinal purposes or essentially for leisure. The type of cannabis consumed for recreational use will be higher in THC content
- **Gateway drug:** A gateway drug is a mildly harmful drug which leads to further consumption of more harmful drugs.
- **UNCND:** The United Nations Commissions on Narcotics Drugs is a commission created by the ECOSOC in 1946. This commission meets annually to discuss international initiatives to tackle the global drug epidemic and acts as one of the governing bodies of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

## General Overview

Before looking at the correlation between the consumption of cannabis and criminal activity. It is important to understand what cannabis is and why it is such a relevant topic in today's world. The cannabis plant derives over 100 different compounds, however the two most common ones are CBD and THC. The first is much more widely accepted, being not addictive, calming and largely used in wellness therapies giving birth to a billion-dollar industry. However, THC is the psychoactive component of marijuana, this means that the consumption of this compound alters the way the user's brain works and perceives its surroundings.

The largest drug-related crime caused by marijuana is its possession in countries where it is illegal to. Over 545,602 people were arrested for possession of the drug in the US in 2019 alone. This number represents a large amount of government spending on policing and detainment of the criminals. When referring to the legalization, many things can be meant, in some countries, possession is illegal meaning that punishments can be imposed if one is found holding

Marijuana (a product made from cannabis leaves) contains a large amount of THC, hence putting it under the category of psychoactive drugs. This psychoactive effect has been known to (sometimes) worsen and even cause certain mental conditions such as memory loss but more importantly cannabis-induced psychosis. Psychosis refers to a state of delirium where hallucinations and delusions may occur. Such psychosis can lead to extreme acts of violence causing harm to others and even homicide. Evidently, such



acts are criminal acts. However, it should be noted that such psychosis can only be caused by abuse of the drug and that such cases are incredibly rare.

In itself, cannabis seldom directly causes criminal activity beyond its possession. Although there is an ongoing debate regarding this, many researchers agree that cannabis is a gateway drug, or in other words, the consumption of cannabis can lead users to later consume more harmful and potent drugs such as cocaine, opioids, amphetamines and more. The consumption and distribution of these drugs is a much larger crime than for cannabis and can result in an even longer sentence in most countries. Furthermore, these drugs are known to promote criminal activity, for example, due to their highly addictive nature and high prices, its users will be much more likely to steal to be able to fund their drug habit which they are unable to escape. Whether these crimes can be put on cannabis is left up to interpretation.


The UN Commission on Narcotics Drugs voted and successfully passed a motion to remove cannabis from the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 after having received a suggestion from the WHO in December 2020. The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs is a list of drugs which have “particularly dangerous properties,” before it was removed, cannabis was listed alongside drugs such as heroin and cocaine. The removal of cannabis from this list means that international regulations on this drug are more likely to be loosened and it is starting to be accepted internationally for a less harmful drug to the population. Internationally, cannabis has been mostly legalized for medicinal use and also for recreational use but in a much smaller amount of countries.

## Major Parties involved:

**The EU** condones the possession of cannabis for recreational use, however, over one third of the EU member states do not incarcerate for minor possession of the drug.

In **The Netherlands**, there are “Coffeeshops,” their names are misleading as they do not sell coffee; instead they sell cannabis for recreational use. The Netherlands is one of the most progressive European countries regarding cannabis laws. The consumption of the drug is decriminalized, however, distribution is heavily monitored. Such shops are licensed by the municipality and are heavily regulated against a strict criteria.

**The United States of America** has been gradually legalizing marijuana within its states, firstly in California in 1996 for medicinal use. Medicinal cannabis use is now legal in 37 states. Recreational cannabis use has also been legalized in 18 states. Different



states have implemented different legislation regarding marijuana usage within their respective borders.

**Canada** was the first G20 member nation to legalize cannabis for medicinal and recreational use in October 2018. Similarly to the USA, Canada has different policies regarding the regulation of the drug.

**The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** is still one of the countries with the most rigid legislation regarding cannabis as the use of the drug goes against the country's Islamic faith. Nevertheless, rare exceptions can be made for medical use if deemed necessary.

**Iceland** is the country with the highest percent of its population consuming marijuana (18.3% in 2019) regardless of the fact that the possession of marijuana for medicinal and recreational purposes is illegal in the country.

**Morocco** was the largest cannabis grower globally in 2017, a large portion of the country is economically dependent on the cultivation of cannabis.

**Uruguay** was the first country to fully legalize cannabis possession and consumption in 2013. The legalization did not lead to a large increase in users. The country's "early start" on the priorly illegal market gave it a head start and has generated the country's economic advantages such as employment and revenue.

## Possible solutions

There are multiple solutions to alleviating the negative effects of cannabis-related crimes beyond partially legalizing the substance:

1. Supporting UN mandated reliable research and studies to further investigate the correlation between Marijuana and drug-related crime. Such studies could be supported by the WHO.
2. Reaching international agreements regarding measures and regulations that should be taken regarding marijuana consumption and distribution. These discussions could be hosted under the UNCND
3. The reformation of the policing system to
  - a. Monitor cannabis distribution to minors
  - b. Monitor illegal trade (exporting and importing) of cannabis
4. Implementation of further legislation to regulate access to cannabinoids

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