

# DrugScope Policy Briefing: Reclassification of Cannabis



In June 2002 David Blunkett the Home Secretary, in a significant change of government policy, announced proposals to change the classification of cannabis and downgrade the drug from Class B to Class C. The legal reclassification of cannabis, one of the biggest developments in British drug policy for 30 years, took place on 29th January 2004.

## Statistics

- **Over 3 million people in the UK smoked cannabis last year** (2004/2005 British Crime Survey)
- **Cannabis is the most commonly-used drug by all age groups** (ibid)
- **9 in 10 drug arrests are for unlawful possession with the vast majority being possession of cannabis** (Drug Seizure and Offender Statistics, Home Office, 2000, 4/02)
- **Arrests for cannabis possession have doubled in the last 10 years** (ibid)
- **Cost of policing cannabis in 1999 estimated at £350 million** (May et al, Times they are a-changing: Policing of cannabis, 2002)
- **An arrest for cannabis possession absorbs 5 hours per officer per case** (police evidence to Home Office Select Committee on Drugs Policy)

## DrugScope's position

- DrugScope supports the reclassification of cannabis as a Class C drug. We support the evidence that on balance, although it is a harmful drug, it is not as harmful as other Class B drugs.
- DrugScope would argue that we need an open education and information campaign on the associated risks of cannabis use (particularly heavy use) and of the dangers of mixing with other drugs, including alcohol. It is necessary to discuss drug use without the fear that this will be misinterpreted as condoning use.
- DrugScope is not aware of any evidence that reclassification will increase use of cannabis. Changes in the way cannabis use is penalised in Australia and the Netherlands have not led to significant increases in use.
- DrugScope recognises some research into the linkage between cannabis use and mental illness but denies a causal link. The evidence shows that for those with existing condition or a pre-disposition towards mental illness, cannabis use can have an exacerbating effect, not that cannabis use *causes* mental illness.
- DrugScope's understanding of the evidence base does not support the theory that cannabis leads to use of other drugs, although we recognise that many people who use drugs such as heroin or crack cocaine also use or may have used cannabis in the past.

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**Further information:** DrugScope briefing on reclassification of cannabis at:  
[www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)