



DrugScope extremely disappointed by cannabis reclassification decision

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DrugScope, the UK's leading drug information and policy charity, today expressed concern and disappointment at the government's decision to ignore independent advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) and return cannabis to class B.

Chief executive of DrugScope, Martin Barnes, said:

"Much has been made of the need to send out a message on cannabis use. Unfortunately, the message given by this decision is that drugs policy is driven as much by political considerations, media headlines and scare stories as by the evidence.

There is no evidence that reclassifying cannabis to Class B will reduce levels of use, levels of harm or the availability of the drug. Nor is there evidence of public want to see tougher penalties for cannabis possession, particularly for young people. The opinion poll survey quoted by the Home Secretary found 60 per cent of the public wanted the penalty for cannabis possession to be either two years, equivalent to Class C, or that there should be no penalty whatsoever.

Using the law to send out a message ignores the evidence on the relative harms of different drugs and the important fact that cannabis use has consistently been falling across all age groups, since before the original reclassification to class C in 2004. The ACMD is right to say that cannabis is primarily a public health problem - the emphasis should be on reducing demand for the drug and improving the public's understanding of cannabis-related harms.

We are extremely disappointed by the decision on classification but welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to adopt all the other recommendations made by the Advisory Council. We will be following the implementation of the recommendations closely.

We welcome the Home Secretary's recognition that reclassification alone is not a sufficient response to public health concerns and hope that the government will ensure that the planned real term reduction in funding for drug treatment and drug education and prevention work with young people is reversed.

Advice on the classification of cannabis forms just one of 21 recommendations made in the ACMD report. It identifies cannabis use as a public health issue and calls for a concerted public health response to use of the drug, with particular emphasis on developing effective prevention and education strategies for young people.

The ACMD also recommends that training be provided for healthcare professionals, to enable them to refer people to appropriate, well-resourced and effective drug treatment for cannabis dependency. DrugScope is concerned that similar recommendations have been made by the ACMD in previous reports, but that insufficient progress in delivery of public health responses to cannabis use has been made.

The legal penalties for cannabis supply will remain the same despite the move to class B (14 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine), but the maximum penalties for possession will increase from 2 years imprisonment to 5 years imprisonment, and/or an unlimited fine. However, last week, the Association of Police Officers (ACPO) indicated that police responses to cannabis possession would be unlikely to change, with formal warnings remaining the appropriate action in the majority of cases.

A survey of public attitudes to cannabis carried out by Ipsos MORI for the ACMD shows that there is little support for tougher penalties for cannabis possession. Of the survey's 1003 respondents, 41 per cent believed that 2 years imprisonment was an appropriate penalty for cannabis possession (equivalent to class C), whereas 27 per cent of those polled believed that there should be no legal penalty whatsoever.

Notes to editors

Contact Ruth Goldsmith in the DrugScope press office at press@drugscope.org.uk or on 020 7940 7517 (07736 895563 out of hours) for further information and/or interviews.

DrugScope is the UK's leading centre of expertise on drugs and the national membership organisation for individuals and agencies working across the drug sector. Our overall aim is to minimise drug related harms to individuals, families and communities. It is DrugScope's role to promote informed, challenged and rational debate and to work to ensure that responses to drug use and the harms caused are evidence-based, pragmatic and effective.

The ACMD's final report, Cannabis: classification and public health is available here:

<http://drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk/publication-search/acmd/acmd-cannabis-report-2008?view=Binary>

Cannabis prevalence

Across all age groups, the government's own statistics show that cannabis use is falling and has been for some time.

From the Home Office British Crime Survey 'Drug Misuse Declared' bulletin for 2006/07

8.2% of 16 - 59 year olds reported using cannabis in the last year - **declining since 2002/03** when this figure was 10.9%

4.8% of 16 - 59 year olds reported using cannabis in the last month - **declining since 2002/03** when this figure was 6.7%

If you take the respondents aged 16 - 24 we find:

20.9% of 16 - 24 year olds reported using cannabis in the last year - **declining since 2001/02** when this figure was 27.3%

12.0% of 16 - 24 year olds reported using cannabis in the last month - **declining since 2001/02** when this figure was 17.6%

From the NHS Information Centre 'Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2006'

10.1% of pupils aged 11 - 15 reported using cannabis in the last year in 2006. The downward trend has been visible since 2003 when the figure stood at 10.1%

Penalties for cannabis supply and possession

The penalties for cannabis supply remain the same whether cannabis is a class C or a class B drug. The only change is reflected in penalties for cannabis possession.

Class B drugs:

For supply 14 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

For possession 5 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

Class C drugs:

For supply 14 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

For possession 2 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

The ACMD commissioned a poll, carried out by Ipsos MORI, to gauge public opinion on the classification of cannabis. Polling was carried out in January 2007 and involved 1003 respondents. When asked what penalties ought to be applied to cannabis possession, 11% considered 7 years to be appropriate (equivalent to class A), 13% considered 5 years to be appropriate (equivalent to class B) and 41% considered 2 years to be appropriate (equivalent to class C). 27% of those polled believed there should be no penalty.

Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published in December 2007 concluded it is doubtful whether the re-classification of cannabis to class B will have any impact on young people's using patterns or methods of gaining access to the drug.

For more, see Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Cannabis supply and young people:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/2175.asp>