

Cannabis legislation: An addiction physician's perspective

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Introduction

- It is an honour and privilege to present to this Senate Committee
- I have practiced addiction medicine in Toronto for 34 years
- I am also actively involved in policy and medical education
- I, and many of my colleagues, have serious concerns about the impact of this legislation on public health
- I will briefly summarize these concerns and propose some solutions

Cannabis use will increase

- With legalization, cannabis will be:
- Easier to obtain
- Inexpensive (\$10/gram)
- More socially acceptable
- Perceived as safe by the public

Legalization will expand the black market

- Illicit market will increase, both for 18+ market and in youth < 18
- 18-year-olds will sell to 17-year-olds
 - 17-year-olds will pay more for high-quality cannabis of known potency
- Illicitly grown cannabis will decline in price to compete with the market for legally purchased cannabis
 - Cannabis is very easy to grow
- In California, medical marijuana card holders were major source of cannabis for youth entering treatment for cannabis use disorder
- Illicit opioid use dramatically expanded when prescription opioids became readily available

Cannabis use before & after legalization

Colorado college students (n=5,421)

Int J Drug Policy 56 (2018): 116-20

	Cannabis use before legalization	Cannabis use after legalization
Age > 21	40%	61%
Age < 21	45%	53%

Cannabis-related harms will increase

- Harms of cannabis increase with increases in population use
 - This is true for all substances (alcohol, opioids, tobacco)
 - Adolescent ED visits for cannabis-related harms (mainly psychiatric), Colorado before and after legalization:
 - **1.8 per 1,000 visits** in 2009 to **4.9 per 1,000 visits** in 2015 ($p = < .0001$)
 - Use of opioids, cocaine and other drugs could increase as well
 - Patients with cannabis use disorder tend to also use alcohol and other drugs
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- Wang et al, J Adolescent Health 2018

Suggestions for change:

Increase the legal limit from 18 to 25 years

- This will slow the increase in cannabis use among youth < 25 years
 - The 18–25 year age group can't purchase cannabis legally, or sell legally purchased cannabis to youth < 18
 - The black market will not lower its price to compete for the 18–25 year old market
- Youth < 25 are at high risk of cannabis-related harms
 - Psychosis, cannabis use disorder, poor school performance etc.
 - The brain is still developing until age 24
 - Cannabis may cause permanent deficits when smoked regularly during adolescence

Limit the amount and potency of cannabis

- Harms of cannabis are related to amount and potency (percent THC)
- Current law allows for purchase of up to 30 grams at a time, with no limit on potency
- Companies are selling products containing as much as 25% THC
- In the 60's, cannabis contained 3% THC on average
- The new high potency cannabis is a **drug** not a **plant**

Limit the amount and potency of cannabis (2)

- Someone who purchases 30 grams per week of 25% THC likely has a cannabis use disorder, and/or is selling the cannabis
- Possible limits:
 - 15 grams for a single purchase
 - Maximum 18% THC
 - Higher cost for higher THC (Similar to higher cost for bottle of whiskey vs. bottle of beer)

Reduce the penalties for selling cannabis

- Selling could result in large fine and jail time of 3 years
- This is far out of proportion to the crime
 - 3 years in jail for selling a legal product
- Will destroy young people's lives and will not stop the black market

Summary

- This legislation will increase cannabis use and cannabis-related harms among youth
- These harms can be mitigated by:
 - Increasing the legal age to 25 years of age
 - Limiting the amount purchased at one time
 - Limiting the potency of THC sold
 - Reducing the penalties for cannabis selling