

A review of the world cannabis situation

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ABSTRACT

Cannabis is the world's most widely cultivated and consumed illicit drug, but there remain major gaps in our understanding of global cannabis markets. For example, it appears that premium sinsemilla cannabis, often produced indoors in consumer countries, has become more potent in recent years and that its market share is also growing in some areas. This may be leading to greater localization of cannabis markets. It may also be responsible for the increase in the proportion of cannabis users in treatment populations at the international level. Assessing the extent and impact of this trend, however, is hampered both by a lack of international standards on issues such as terminology and by unanswered research questions. In order to arrive at accurate global estimates of the extent of production, there is a need for more scientific data on cannabis yields. On the demand side, more information is required on the question of cannabis dosage and volumes used by both occasional and regular users. Cannabis is not a uniform drug: the impact of using cannabis of differing potencies and chemical compositions needs to be researched. While issues concerning cannabis have been evaluated many times in the past, it remains a highly adaptable plant and, consequently, a dynamic drug, requiring constant reassessment.

Keywords: cannabis; cannabis abuse; cannabis production; cannabis trafficking; global.

Introduction

The present review was prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 59/160 of 20 December 2004, which requested the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to prepare a global market survey of cannabis. Remarkably, in the 80 years that cannabis has been under international control, during which it has remained the most commonly used illicit drug, the international community has never conducted a comprehensive study of the market for this drug. There are at least two factors that have led to this state of neglect.

- International law treats cannabis as it does other illicit drugs; but in practice, several States have reduced the priority afforded to enforcement of laws on cannabis relative to other drug issues. Signatories to a range

of international drug control treaties have agreed that cannabis should be deemed an illicit drug. Despite these agreements, many States have, in various ways, relaxed their controls over cannabis. Even where these changes do not amount to a breach of the treaties, there appears to be a divergence in spirit between international agreements and individual State action. This discontinuity has not been addressed at an international level and thus international efforts to address cannabis have also fallen by the wayside.

- The sheer scope of cannabis production and consumption is daunting. While an estimated 95 per cent of the world's illicit heroin supply comes from opium produced in just one country (Afghanistan) and almost all of the world's cocaine comes from three countries (Bolivia, Colombia and Peru), cannabis is cultivated in virtually every country in the world. It is grown both indoors and outdoors, often in small amounts by the users themselves. It is frequently traded informally, or shared freely, by people not involved in other criminal activity. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to estimate the amount of cannabis produced, trafficked and consumed—measures that form the traditional pillars of a market analysis.

In essence, it is very difficult to monitor an activity that people in virtually every country in the world conduct quietly in their own homes and about which the international community appears ambivalent. While there has been extensive research on the health effects of cannabis, including a growing literature examining its potential therapeutic use, there has been little academic study of the ways the drug is cultivated, dealt and smoked. Thus, many basic questions remain largely unanswered in the scientific and published literature, including the following:

- How much of a cannabis plant is presently used as a drug?
- How much marketable cannabis can be produced from a given expanse of land?
- How much of the plant material bought is actually smoked by the consumer and how much is discarded as waste?
- How much cannabis by weight do users consume in a given session of use?

In order to begin to answer some of these questions, the present review has had to resort to the so-called “grey literature”, including documents produced by those who cultivate and use cannabis themselves. The reliability of many of these publications is dubious and they are at times contradictory, but until actual scientific investigation takes place on these issues, there is no alternative to their use.

In the end, the present review delivers no startling new statistics and exposes no heretofore concealed trends. Rather, it looks at some of the questions that have been asked above and makes a modest attempt to answer them using a range of

sources. The result does contain some surprises, but asks more questions than it answers, and cannot avoid becoming a request for further research. A lot more information is needed about the way cannabis is procured and consumed for evidence-based policy recommendations to be made.

The first part of this review looks at the technical aspects of cannabis production, in particular the modern innovations in indoor cultivation. The question of cannabis yields is explored. The second part looks at cannabis consumption, including the questions of how the drug is procured, the size of cannabis cigarettes, dosage and patterns of use. An attempt is then made to reconcile supply-side and demand-side estimates.

The third part of the review looks at what is known about cannabis markets in regions around the world, highlighting the universality of the problem. This is followed by a look at the impact of cannabis, focusing on two areas of primary concern: the recent increases in sinsemilla potency and their possible impact on treatment demand; and the recent findings of the scientific literature on the health effects of cannabis consumption.