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# Research report

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Issue: Discussing the legalization and regulation of weed to undermine criminal drug cartels and redirect resources towards rehabilitation and harm reduction.

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### Introduction

Around the world, the most consumed illicit drug is marijuana, otherwise known as weed. This drug is the most cultivated, trafficked and abused with about 147 million people: 2.5% of the world population consuming this drug (WHO). Because of this fact, many nations have turned away from hunting down weed users and putting them in jail, but rather decriminalised the substance and focusing their resources and regulation and control and helping rehabilitation efforts. This most famously can be seen in the case of the Netherlands, which has decriminalised the substance since 1976 (Center for Public Impact 2016). This has helped the Netherlands focus more on the safety of the product and work on cutting the product off from criminal impacts (Dutch News 2024). This does not only happen in the Netherlands, as many other nations, such as, but not limited to Canada, Jamaica, and many states in the USA. This however is not the case all around the world, such as in Venezuela it's highly illegal and possessing it can result in 1-2 years prison (Morris). This strict regulation has resulted in a large amount of dangerous illegal weed in the nation, such as the Columbian cartels shipping it through Venezuela leaving a majority of it behind to be used by the population. Recently at the end of 2022, the government seized an excess of 3.4 tons of weed (Morris). It is unsure whether decriminalising the drug will help, however, if you make something illegal that people are going to do anyways, which opens the door for it to continue but in a less safe and more harmful way. Therefore, in this report we will go over the history of weed, the advantages and disadvantages of weed regulation in terms of the illegal market, the "quality of the product", regulation and quality control, and how legalisation can help rehabilitation efforts and harm reduction.

### Definitions of key terms

- Weed/Marijuana:** The term "marijuana" describes the dried seeds, stems, flowers, and leaves of the *Cannabis sativa* or *Cannabis indica* plant. The plant has additional comparable chemicals as well as the psychoactive substance THC. It is also possible to make extracts from the cannabis plant. (National Institute on drug abuse)
- Cannabis:** This is just the plant itself that weed is produced from through certain processes.
- Black-market:** This is a term for the system of illegal trade for things such as weapons or drugs.
- Bad quality product:** This means the product could cause negative health issues due to low quality.
- Rehabilitation facilities (Rehab facilities):** Medical facilities that are specifically designed to help people with their addictions to harmful substances such as different drugs or alcohol.

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### Cartels:

These are criminal organisations that mainly focus on drug trafficking as a means of income to fund their criminal activity.

### Regulations:

These can refer to taxes on the sale of weed or of the production or quality but in their simple form these are governmental rules on the legal sale of weed in each nation .

## General overview

### Weed legalisation and history

The first identified use of cannabis on humans for medical reasons was in 2800 BC in China. Since then, the evolution of cannabis has evolved throughout the world with the evolution of trade. One of the first times it appeared in Western civilization was in 129 AD where Geddon used cannabis for therapeutic properties and mood enhancement (university of Sydney). For the next century the evolution of cannabis in medicine evolved such as the isolation of CBN in 1898. However, in the 20th century, the public sentiment around cannabis began to evolve to hate it from movies such as reefer madness, that depicted cannabis as an evil drug, to the banning of the substance by laws, such as the controlled substance act in the United States that listed cannabis as having no accepted medical use. For most of the 20th century throughout the world more and more nations began to ban cannabis and its final product weed. However, later in the 21st century humanity began to understand that we did not have as much negative impact as we started and many citizens began to fight for the legalisation of the substance.

### Weed legalisation impact on the black-market

Legalising weed could be mistaken as a one size fits all solution to the black market, however, this appears to be untrue. In Canada, even after making weed fully legal for recreational use, the black market still holds a great majority of the market, over the legal industry so much so that 79% of all weeds bought in Canada was still through the black market. This is due to two facts, the first is that the legal government marijuana is just too expensive. Surveys have found that the government regulated price of 10.91 Canadian dollars per gram is 40 percent higher than the illegal black-market counterpart. The second fact is that even though the government has tried its best to keep up with the demand, however in many parts of the country there is simply not enough legal supply to meet demand and therefore people turn to the illegal market (Blake). This sad fact is not just the case in Canada, it happens throughout the world for similar reasons. In California, the black-market sales reach 8 billion USD more than the legal market annually for similar reasons as in Canada. "Retailers must pay a \$1,000 application fee and a minimum \$2,500 licensing fee annually, and sales are taxed at about 38 percent (combining all applicable taxes). This causes the price of legal marijuana products to exceed that of illegal products by two to three times."-(Miron, Winter 2023). All this have made it clear that legislation is not a simple fix as with the over regulation taking place throughout the world where weed is

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legal this allows not only the black-market to continue, but thrive as minorities and the poor will go this illegal and dangerous source for the simple reason as the legal market is too expensive for them and as the biggest consumer of weed are the ones with lower income (Witters 2024). This can result in the legalisation hurting the people it was meant to help. The legalisation and tolerance do not have an impact on the amount of weed on the black-market in most cases however it can help quality control over the legal marijuana to make sure it's safer and has no criminal interference.

**Weed quality control and regulation**

If you make something legal or tolerated, you have the luxury to regulate it such is the case in the Netherlands where the government has been working a new system the closed cannabis chain seen in figure 1

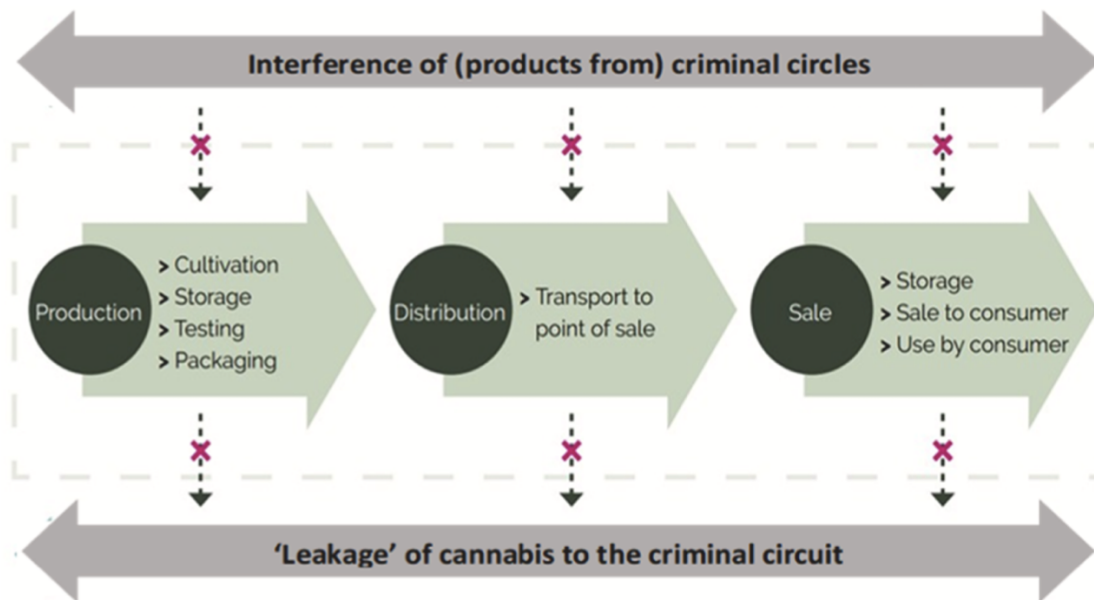


Figure 1 Essential characteristics of the closed cannabis chain (Knottnerus, Et Al 2023)

This system is being tested in multiple municipalities in the Netherlands to make sure the product reaching the customer is always safe and has nothing to do with the criminal black-market. This system relies on government approval in the modern-day Netherlands. The production of weed is still illegal but in this system the production approved by the government with strict criteria listed here as seen in the report by Knottnerus, Et Al:

- Sufficient variation of cannabis products; the growers consult with the coffeeshops in the intervention municipalities about the types and quantities of weed and hash they will produce.
- Joints must be supplied by the grower pre-rolled and in packaging as prescribed. Edibles must also be prepared and packaged by the growers and should only be made with pure/raw cannabis. Delivery of cannabis oil or other cannabis extracts is not allowed.
- There are no requirements for the THC and CBD content of the products.
- Accurate product information (e.g., % THC, % CBD, health risks, use) +
- Secure packaging +

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- Secure storage +
- Track & trace system and transparent records to monitor the closed chain +
- Avoiding vulnerable transport movements +
- Directors must have passed an integrity (BIBOB) [24] screening; certificate of conduct required for personnel. +
- Exclusively growing cannabis for the experiment
- Testing/quality control (e.g., THC and CBD levels, pesticides) in an independent dedicated laboratory. +
- Safe working & living environment +
- Permit required from the municipality in which the company is located (Knottnerus, Et Al 2023)

This results in safer quality and less influence by the black-market. This experiment aims to show that this will reduce weed related crimes and make the product safer and make a dent in the black-market empire. This type of regulation focuses on the quality rather than tax or money. This is what can lead to a consumer shift from black-market to the better and regulated weed. This will help not only decrease the risk, but also help the police have an easier job as there will be less illegal trafficking. This type of regulation can only be done through regulation as if the product is illegal. There can be no quality control, this is the same lesson learned in the era of prohibition in the United States of America. Most importantly this type of regulation will make sure the consumers have more resources to help them by the fact that the government will have more ability to provide harm reduction and rehabilitation programs.

### Legislation impacts on rehabilitation and harm reduction

There are in general two different types of weed use, one is the medical use and recreational use, where the recreational use is using weed for its psychological effects creating a (in positive cases) a sense of relaxation and calmness, however medical weed can be used to treat anxiety, Alzheimer's disease and other types of medical conditions (Mayo clinic). This type of weed can be prescribed by a medical professional. Legalising weed can help patients gain easier and better-quality access to the product and help harm reduction. Further legalisation has had impacts on helping rehabilitation for those who are addicted and need help to get rid of this habit. In the Netherlands, thanks to new open resources from not needing to spend so much of fighting the drug, the government has been able to expand its effort to fight not just weed addiction but all drugs with more outpatient care and helping addicts improve their quality of life (Regering van Nederland). This has shown that legalisation can have a good impact on helping patients to get access to better weed when they need it and help those who never want to use it again. However, there are people that say if weed is allowed on streets everyone will be and addict, but this is untrue as if you look at the Netherlands only 5.4 percent of people smoke weed (Reuters 2009).

### Negative impacts on the youth

Legalisation of marijuana does not only come with benefits, but can come with severe issues as well, such as its impact on the adolescent population. During the periods between 2002 and

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2008, in the United States of America, states that decided to legalise medical marijuana, saw a huge rise in marijuana use and a lower risk perception among adolescents (Ladegard Et All). Using marijuana among adolescents can lead to issues such as getting addicted to other more dangerous drugs, having difficulties in school, or getting problems with concentration and memory (American Academy of child and adolescent psychiatry). The legalisation of marijuana can result in the youth populations, lack of understanding towards the dangers of using this drug on a regular basis at their age and can lead them to be able to access these substances more freely and intern get addicted at higher rates.

### **Major parties involved**

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*WHO*

*This organisation has helped collect data on weed and its effect as well as its user consumer base. This organisation has a key role in helping to address the issue as they can help make worldwide decisions on the topic and conduct activity throughout the world making them an extremely useful and important organisation to this issue.*

*UNODC*

*This branch of the United Nations helps deal with drugs and crime and is responsible for doing research and stopping the criminal cartels that would be impacted through the legalisation of marijuana as well as this this organisation conducts preventative measures and harm reduction on different drugs meaning that they are also an extremely useful and important party to be considered during this issue.*

*Rehabilitation centres*

*Rehabilitation centres are heavily involved as they are responsible for helping individuals with addiction to these substances get rid of their problem and try to find a helpful purpose in society. These centres help their patients and this legislation to legalise weed can help them as it would mean that their patients don't have to go through dangerous circumstances to get marijuana while they're still addicted. Helping the rehabilitation centres focus on the mental notes of addiction and must focus less on the physical repercussions.*

*Black-market & Cartels*

*These organisations are at the very core of the legislation as they are the root cause of the problem as they sell dangerous products illegally which costs the government a lot to destroy. The legislation aims to make sure these cartels lose their business, so they are a very important part to consider in this debate as this legislation could help end them, but also could help them grow further if done incorrectly.*

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*Weed Shops & Distributors*

*Although legalisation brings advantages such as safer operations and legal recognition, poorly regulated marijuana businesses and distributors can also cause issues. Products that are too expensive could lure customers back to the black market. To eliminate criminal cartels and ensure that these companies put safety first, proper regulation is needed. It is also possible to promote a healthier market and community by shifting resources away from police forces and into harm reduction and rehabilitation.*

*Consumers*

*These people would no longer have to rely on black-market and dangerous substances and would now finally be able to access these recreational drugs safely without the need to fear criminal cartels and other dangers such as bad product quality. The customers that have previously aided dangerous organisations which lead to the issue to begin with can now use the product with a clear conscience.*



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## Timeline of Key Events

- 1923 Many nations such as but not limited to Mexico, South Africa, Canada, and Panama banned the use and cultivation of cannabis.
- 1970 The Netherlands separates the different types of drugs into soft and hard drugs adding weed in the soft category and establishing tolerance for the drug (Center for Public Impact 2016).
- 1996 California becomes the first USA state to legalise the use of medical weed. (California state 1996).
- 2001-2009 Era of tolerance begins with nations such as but not limited to Portugal, Luxemburg and Estonia all decriminalise the drug while some nations like Canada fully legalise it.
- 2018 The WHO begins research into the medical use of weed mandated under treaty law (Zemouli, Krawitz 2022).
- 2020 The UN partially reschedules weed by removing it from most restrictive substances list (UN 2020).
- 2023 The launch of the Dutch controlled cannabis chain experiment in some Dutch municipalities (government of the Netherlands).

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been many previous attempts to legalise marijuana with a positive impact on health and crime such as in California and Canada however in many cases these attempts have not been successful due to the previously mentioned over regulation of the product and high prices leaving customers to be even more reliant on the black-market and the cartel. This then led to bad quality of the product. Buying from the black-market and from the cartels leads the cartels to make more money which allows them to distribute more dangerous drugs like heroin and fentanyl and conduct violent activities like gang wars and murders. The best case of the previous attempt has been the Dutch experiment, however so far as it's a new experiment it has not provided any sufficient results and therefore cannot fully be considered as we don't know whether it will yield positive or negative results.

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## Possible solutions

Legalising marijuana would solve numerous problems with drug quality control and rehabilitation. This is the first solution. Priced competitively with black-market counterparts, legal marijuana should entice customers to select the safer, regulated variety. Additionally, money saved by lessening marijuana business enforcement ought to go towards expanding medical marijuana. Strict control would be maintained and cartels would be further prevented from entering the regulated marijuana market by putting in place a system akin to the Dutch cannabis chain. Additionally there are organisations such as the DPA (drug policy alliance) that say governments should stop arresting individuals on minor drug crimes and focus a large amount on the medical sector to make sure addicts get help with rehabilitation and with safe care in cases of overdose.

## Further reading

*Journal talks further about the Dutch closed cannabis experiment*

[https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016885102200313X?ref=pdf\\_download&fr=RR-2&rr=8b16ba443e0e663a](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016885102200313X?ref=pdf_download&fr=RR-2&rr=8b16ba443e0e663a)

*marijuana, legalization, Colorado, Uruguay, public health*

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1073666.pdf>

*Desecuritization of cannabis in the United States: drug policy reform from the ground-up*

<https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/101/101131/tde-14062023-112946/en.php>

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