

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Setting Guidelines for the Recreational Use of Marijuana

Forum	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
Issue:	Setting Guidelines for the Recreational Use of Marijuana
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Introduction

Marijuana is a drug that has both recreational and medicinal applications. Since the early 2000s, it has seen a significant and constant incline in usage and distribution. This has been largely amplified by its gradual legalization in several countries, its normalization in society, and its endorsement by famous celebrities and public figures such as Jay-Z, Mike Tyson, and John Legend.

Marijuana is one of the most commonly used illicit drugs globally, with an estimation of approximately 2.5% of the entire population consuming it; a staggering amount when compared to other drugs of the same nature. This is especially concerning when considering the abundance of harmful effects that marijuana consumption may entail, especially for young teenagers.

However, there is an argument to be made for its medicinal benefits, such as fighting cancer, aiding in relapse prevention, and managing anxiety and stress. For this reason, setting guidelines for the recreational use of marijuana has proved to be a never-ending challenge for countries around the world. Ultimately, the complete legalization of marijuana consumption regardless of the intent can lead to abuse and addiction, but the complete illegalization of it can deny some individuals of the necessary medication they need to remain well and healthy.

More specifically, some of the main concerns a nation may have in regards to the regulation of marijuana, especially recreational marijuana, is that today's marijuana is far more potent than previous years, with average THC levels increasing from around 1% in the 1960s and 70s, to a whopping 15% presently, even going as far as 30% in several modern varieties of the drug. Not only this, but marijuana has addictive properties and is often obtained by kids and adolescents, risking an epidemic of young drug users jeopardizing their health permanently. Furthermore, marijuana legislation can be costly for nations, mainly due to social costs derived from accidents, and health damage.



Overall, there is a lack of successful examples of nations legalizing recreational marijuana, with the initiative often increasing crime, usage, and distribution, and failing to put an end to the prevalent dilemma that is drug cartels and the black market, with marijuana only making up a small percentage of their abundance of sales. As for its medicinal benefits, they are not acquired by smoking the plant, and legalizing medical use often simply results in nationwide abuse and dependence. These factors all contribute to the complex nature of regulating marijuana use, as they all must be taken into account during decision-making, preventing nations from simply adopting an 'all or nothing' approach.

Definition of Key Terms

Cannabis

A distinctive plant that generates psychoactive, medicinal, and therapeutic effects. Alternative names for Cannabis include marijuana, pot, weed, and other slang terms.

Cannabinoids

Natural substances produced by the cannabis plant that are responsible for cannabis' various physical and mental effects. THC and CBD are the two most common cannabinoids.

THC

The principal psychoactive substance that cannabis produces. It is most often associated with producing euphoric effects.

CBD

One of the main cannabinoids found in cannabis along with THC. Contrary to THC, It is used for the purpose of benefitting from the medical and therapeutic effects of cannabis without altering one's state of mind.

Regulation

A rule or set of rules set by an authoritative entity to maintain order.

Legalization



The action of allowing something that was previously illegal/prohibited by law.

Decriminalization

The reclassification of something deemed to be a criminal offense as a non-criminal act, meaning the individual(s) responsible do not receive criminal sanctions.

Narcotic

A drug that is consumed strictly for mood-enhancing purposes with no medicinal benefits, especially one that is illegal to sell.

Psychotropic

A term referring to drugs that impact an individual's mental state.

Joint

An alternative term for a cannabis cigarette. It is composed of ground cannabis rolled in a small sheet of paper, ready to be smoked. It is one of the most common methods of cannabis consumption.

General Overview

The rise of marijuana consumption and its effects

Dating back to 2800 BC, Marijuana was initially derived from the Cannabis plant in central Asia or western China, and was regarded as a natural substance used strictly for its healing properties. Not only this, but marijuana has been praised for its therapeutic effects in several texts of the Indian Hindus, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans. These texts claimed that cannabis was the solution to an array of major health problems including arthritis, depression, amenorrhea, inflammation pain, lack of appetite, and asthma.

However, as our understanding of the drug developed, the narrative shifted, with many countries deeming cannabis it to be of no medical use but rather of high potential for abuse. This was the case as with the discovery of cannabinoids such as THC and CBD, researchers began uncovering the harmful side of marijuana, with THC producing euphoric effects that can lead to hallucinations,



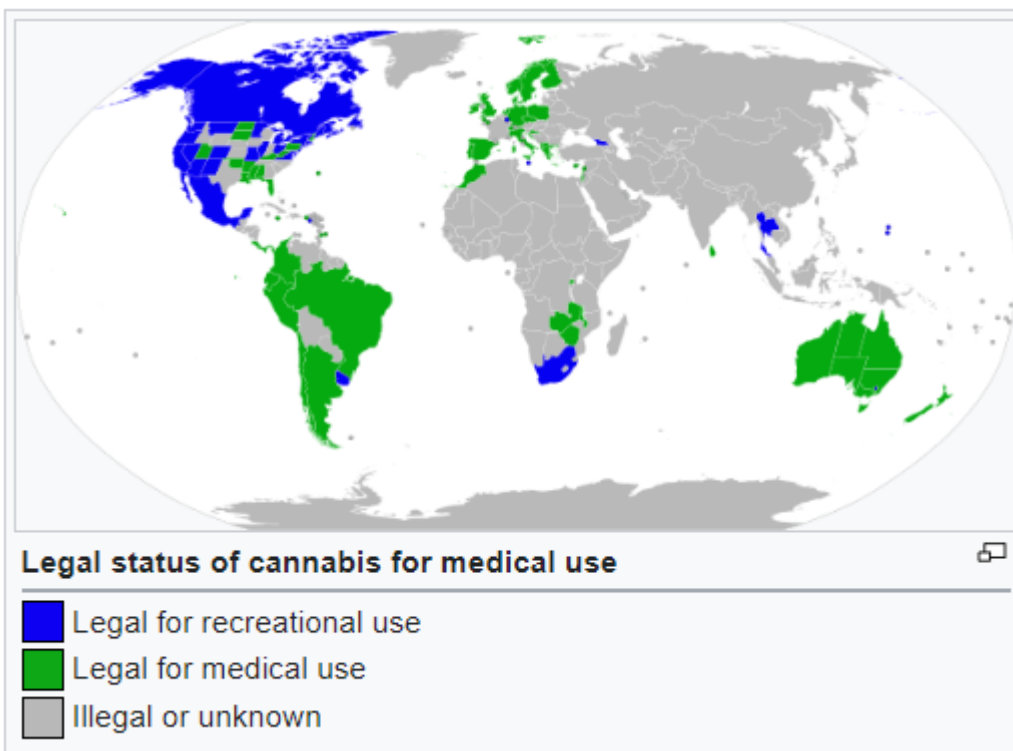
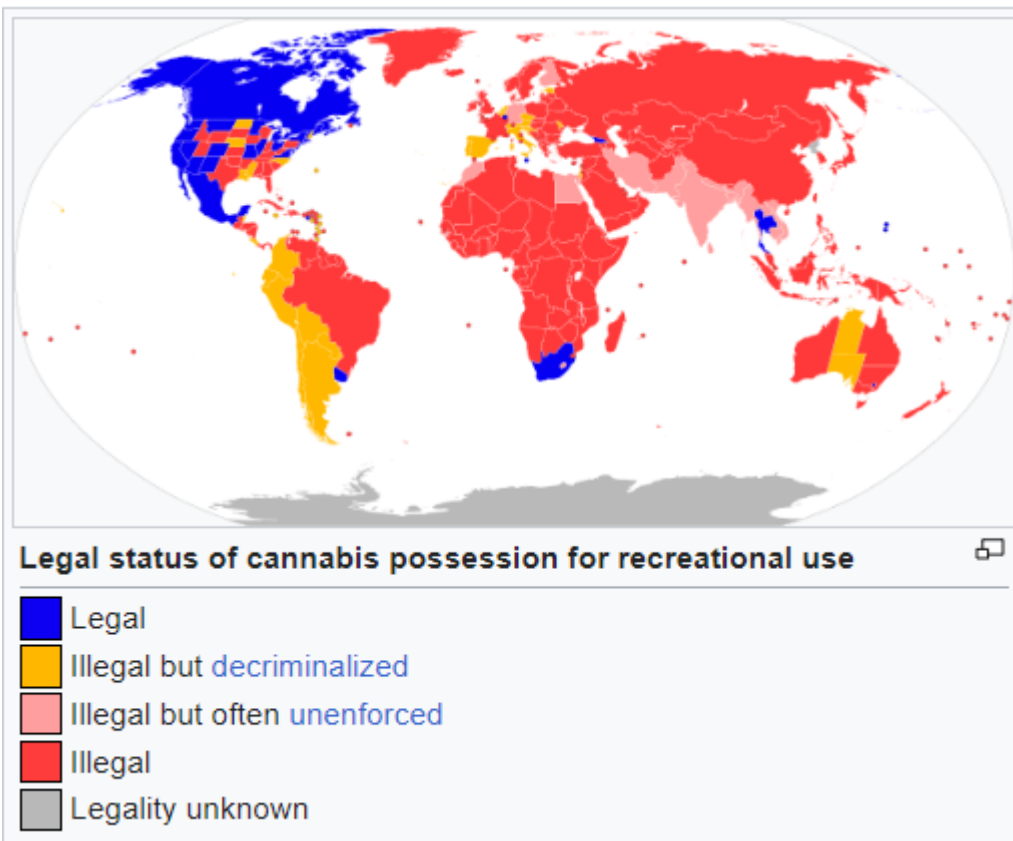
panic, and delusion. Despite this, it is important to note that many of these countries were ignorant of the fact that marijuana still had many medical benefits, which is why many of their citizens protested the illegalization. Most notably, CBD was largely utilized for its anxiety reducing properties, which was often achieved without the need to alter an individual's state of mind. Consequently, the health benefits of the medical use of marijuana began to be acknowledged globally, persuading several countries to legalize the prescription of marijuana for medical purposes.

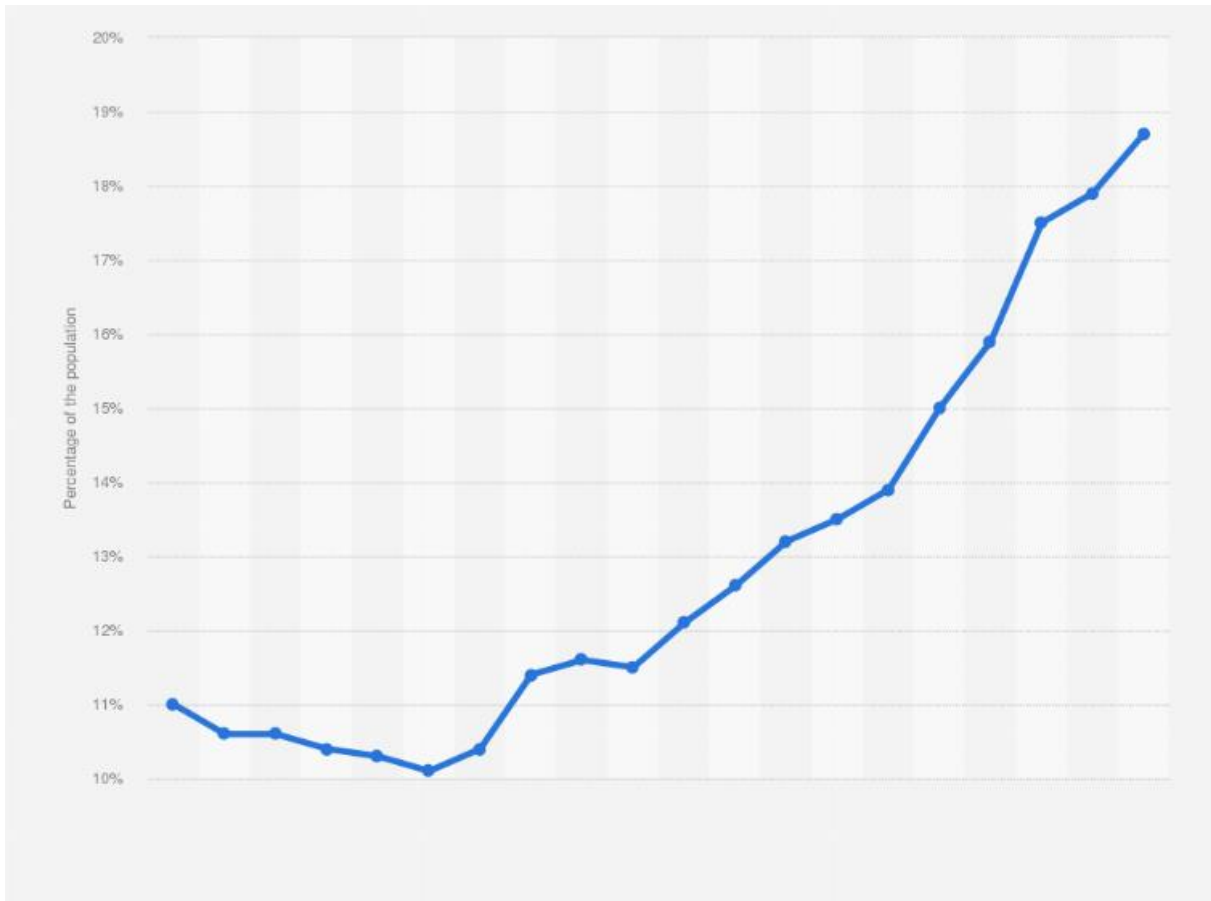
On the other hand, recreational use of marijuana remained a controversial topic in society, and proved to be a challenge to set fair guidelines for. Arguments for the complete legalization of recreational use of marijuana mainly stem from economical and personal perspectives, with many believing that it would eliminate the costly and racist nature of enforcing marijuana laws, boost the economy by creating new job opportunities and generating tax revenue, and simply make the majority of citizens happy. Despite this, the growth of the cannabis plant negatively impacts the environment, has adverse health risks according to health experts, and can bring along significant societal costs.

In the United States of America, marijuana is in abundance, with the central use being recreational. Therefore, most American citizens take on a liberal approach, and thus advocate for the complete legalization of marijuana, with the United States making up most of the locations where recreational use of marijuana is legal. However, that does not mean that recreational use of marijuana is not popular in other countries. For example, despite it being technically illegal, Netherlands is the top consumer of marijuana and the distribution of marijuana is decriminalized, even when it is done in public.

Nonetheless, many countries believe the recreational use of marijuana serves no purpose, and some choose to ban cannabis as a whole, or restrict its use to only medical purposes. In some unique cases, marijuana can be illegal but unenforced, limiting its usage, but not denying it completely, creating an illegal marijuana market, generating income for the multi-billion dollar industry that is marijuana. Additionally, many countries deem marijuana to be illegal, but it is decriminalized, meaning it is not seen as a criminal offense to distribute, consume, or sell marijuana, creating a similar effect.







Distribution of Cannabis Use in the United States 2002-2021

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

With over 500 staff members worldwide, the UNODC is most prominent contributor in the battle against illicit drugs and international crime. The UNODC plays a vital role in setting guidelines for the recreational use of marijuana.

World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)

An international independent agency that strongly enforces a dope-free movement, especially in sporting events, but also in countries as a whole.



United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)

Initially established by Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the CND oversees international pursuit to control the use and distribution of narcotics and psychotropic substances, alongside assisting ECOSOC in controlling the introduction of international drug treaties.

International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)

An independent 'court-like' entity responsible for overseeing the introduction of the United Nations national drug control conventions.

Canada, Thailand, Uruguay, and all subnational U.S. jurisdictions (excluding Virginia and Washington)

These are the only countries where commercial sale and possession of marijuana used for recreational purposes is fully legal nationwide. More specifically:

Canada – Recreational use of cannabis is legal with certain restrictions (in regards to possession, purchase, sharing and production) and age requirements based on province/territory.

*** Thailand** – First country in Asia to decriminalize the recreational use of marijuana. However, as of as recently as September 2023-January 2024, Thailand is in the process of a major reversal in which laws banning the recreational use of cannabis are being passed.

Uruguay – The first country in the modern period to legalize cannabis (December 2013), with cannabis being one of the most commonly used drugs presently.

Subnational U.S. jurisdictions (excluding Virginia and Washington) – Some states have fully legalized the recreational use of marijuana, while others have only decriminalized it.

Organized Crime Groups & Drug Cartels

They control the multi-billion dollar industry that is marijuana in countries where it is illegal, and can manipulate the market whether that is through prices, distribution, or production in order to remain in power and ahead of their competitors.

Timeline of Key Events



Date	Description of event
April 29 th 1911	Massachusetts prohibits cannabis, being the first US state to do so.
February 9 th 1925	Cannabis was included in the Geneva Opium Convention by the League of Nations.
August 2 nd 1937	Both the recreational and medical use of marijuana was banned by the US nationwide under the terms of the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937.
24 th January-25 th March 1961	The United Nations classifies cannabis in schedule I and schedule IV. Ctrl + Click here to learn more about drug scheduling.
1961	Cannabis is decriminalized in the Netherlands.
1978	The California Compassionate Use Act was passed, permitting the medical use of marijuana in California.
November 6 th 1996	Uruguay takes initiative to become the first country to legalize cannabis used for recreational purposes.
December 10 th 2013	The first legal cannabis markets are opened in Colorado and Washington DC.
January 1 st 2014	An act was passed in Jamaica to decriminalize small-scale possession of marijuana, and to completely legalize the medical use of it.
February 25 th 2015	Recreational cannabis use is legalized in Canada.
October 17 th 2018	The UN reclassifies cannabis upon recognizing its medical and therapeutic potential, along with the US Congress passing a bill to decriminalize marijuana as a whole.
November 1 st - December 2 nd 2020	

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events



- UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs reclassifies cannabis to recognize its therapeutic uses, 2 December 2020 (<https://www.who.int/news/item/04-12-2020-un-commission-on-narcotic-drugs-reclassifies-cannabis-to-recognize-its-therapeutic-uses>)
- Changes in the scope of control of substances: proposed scheduling recommendations by the World Health Organization on cannabis and cannabis-related substances, 4 March 2020 (CND/DEC/63/14)
- Safe handling and disposal of synthetic drugs, their precursors and other chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of drugs, July 11 2023 (CND/RES/66/2)
- Strengthening international cooperation to address the links between illicit drug trafficking and illicit firearms trafficking, July 14 2022 (CND/RES/65/2)
- Improving data collection on, and responses to, the harmful effects of the non-medical use of pharmaceuticals containing narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or new psychoactive substances, July 10 2021 (CND/RES/64/4)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

One of the most notable instances in which an attempt to regulate cannabis was made is the 1970 Controlled Substances Act, passed by the United States. This act entailed the prohibition of cannabis federally along with numerous other drugs of similar nature. The act was an update on the previous 1937 Marijuana Tax Act, where most instances of marijuana use was banned due to the heavy tax that came along with it, and specifically mentioned the manufacture, importation, possession, use, and distribution of the drugs included as prohibited. Despite being a very impactful form of cannabis regulation, it proved to be unsuccessful at tackling drug use, abuse, and overdoses.

Shortly after in 1972, the Netherlands began classifying drugs into categories based on their harm/danger, where cannabis was deemed to be a 'less dangerous' category drug. To support this, possession of 30 grams or less was classed as a simple misdemeanour. However, this form of classification was very vague and somewhat baseless, with no clear indication on what constituted the 'danger' of a drug. Not to mention the 30 gram rule was difficult to enforce accurately, making the effort by the Netherlands in 1972 impractical.



More recently, with the initiative of former president José Mujica, Uruguay became the first country to fully legalize the recreational use of marijuana. This enabled the home growth of up to six plants and the initiation of cannabis clubs. The central objective of this initiative was to create an environment where marijuana use and distribution wasn't out of control. This bold decision to be the first to take on such an initiative proved to be relatively successful, with drug trafficking rates in Uruguay at steadily decreasing and the marijuana industry positively contributing to the country's annual GDP. Nonetheless, there is some controversy surrounding the decision as it gives of the idea that marijuana is safe, promoting increased use among kids and adolescents.

From a more global perspective, there has been a general push for cannabis decriminalization mainly in European countries, with timelines of cannabis laws and regulation showing a global shift in the mid-to-late 2000s where several countries began to decriminalize cannabis in an effort to put an end to the illegal market and the rampant use.

Possible Solutions

One solution that could be proposed is legalizing marijuana in a way that prioritizes health, justice, equity, community, education, and reinvestment. This philosophy promotes the idea where strictly adults should be fully allowed to purchase marijuana both for recreational and medical purposes, and all tax revenue derived from marijuana sales to be reinvested back into education, helping out communities, and improving quality of life within the respective nation. This is a suitable approach as it would satisfy the overwhelming majority of most nations who advocate for the legalization of marijuana, it would put an end to targeted arrests for individuals of colour, and would heavily contribute to the growth of a healthy economy. This could be implemented with a limit on marijuana possession in order to minimize instances of abuse and overdose.

An alternative solution could be legalizing recreational marijuana, but setting guidelines for factors that create issues for nations such as potency, amount, price, and possession. Testing for chemical content in regards to potency before distribution will for the most part ensure that recreational marijuana is not easy for an individual to abuse and overdose, thus decreasing significant social costs from accidents and health damage. Additionally, reducing the amount of circulation in terms of distribution limits the amount of marijuana that can be possessed, and thus reduces risk of the harmful effects of the drug and decreases amounts of arrests, including ones that



involve any prejudice. Price is also a crucial factor as setting legal price too high gives incentive for illegal markets to thrive, rendering the efforts pointless. This will allow a nation to take advantage of economic benefits of marijuana, while minimizing any harm caused by it.

One final solution could be simply to advertise recreational marijuana distribution as illegal, but only allow its sale from the government. In theory, this should minimize marijuana use nationwide as sales are only controlled by the government, meaning in cases of increased use, distribution can be cut back. This also nullifies the illegal market and promotes a healthy environment within a country both economically and socially, as citizens who were unable to purchase marijuana in fear of legal sanction will now be able to make use of it freely, but in a controlled manner.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Official UNODC website: <http://www.unodc.org/>

Appendix II

Official WHO website: <http://www.who.int/>

Appendix III

Official UN website: <http://www.un.org/>



