

Cannabis harm prevention message a must, says study

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Cannabis harm prevention messages are essential, according to police in places where the drug has been decriminalised. Credit: Massey University

Government, police and health agencies need clear guidelines for public campaigns on preventing harm from cannabis use, according to new

research from Massey University.

Carrie Drake, who graduated this week with a Master of International Security, investigated the social harms from [cannabis](#) (aka marijuana, pot, weed, grass, dope) by interviewing [police](#) in countries where the drug is legally available. Her findings come amid public debate about possible law change in New Zealand.

Her study aimed to find out what preventive measures are effective in countries where cannabis is legalised, to help inform and prepare New Zealand Police of likely outcomes if cannabis is legalised here. She found that cannabis causes social harm regardless of its legal status, including as a factor in criminal and gang activity, in road accidents and in the [mental health](#) of younger users from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Titled The Social Harm of Cannabis – what can the New Zealand Police learn from observations of Police Officers in non-prosecutorial jurisdictions?, her study is timely and relevant, she says, with a groundswell of support for legalising cannabis – for medicinal and/or recreational use. A New Zealand Drug Foundation poll last year showed 64 per cent of the population in favour of decriminalising cannabis for personal use.

Ms Drake, who did her degree through Massey's Centre for Defence and Security Studies, says that while 'P' (meth or methamphetamine), dominates headlines and police resources in terms of drug offending and social harm, it would be a mistake to minimise the impact of cannabis, deemed a 'soft' – and therefore less worrisome – drug.

"Cannabis harm still occurs in non-prosecutorial jurisdictions...therefore, cannabis harm is an on-going social problem regardless of the drug's legal status, and it will also be an on-going police problem," she says.

What do police in weed-friendly places say?

Front line [police officers](#) she interviewed in the Netherlands and states of Colorado and Oregon in the United States, where recreational cannabis use is not an offence, provided insights on how their communities responded with cannabis legally available.

They said that contrary to expectations, legalising the drug did not eliminate crime related to selling it, or gangs from continuing to profit from its sale.

All of her interviewees had cannabis law reform presented as a positive change for police, yet – as one officer said, "we just have not seen all the wonderful promises that were made to us."

Others observed cannabis was a gateway to harder drugs, and one officer expressed concern that the legal cannabis industry was attempting to target children to create a future market.

Front-line police officers she interviewed noted the following issues:

- the enduring role organised crime plays in profiting from cannabis
- inconsistent police policies are exploited, resulting in erosion of perceived police effectiveness
- driving while cannabis-impaired is a largely unmitigated risk, which may be a significant factor in vehicle crashes
- cannabis regularly misused by youth causes learning difficulties and leads to poor social outcomes
- it is important, and sometimes difficult, to get harm-prevention messaging right

Youth, cannabis use and mental health a concern

The area of most concern is youth consumption of cannabis, says Ms Drake, because it is strongly associated with mental and social harms. However, she points out that it can be tricky to evaluate the direct harm of cannabis for youth because it is difficult to separate from other types of risky behaviours.

While mental health problems caused by cannabis are outside the scope of police to prevent or reduce; "it is NZP [the New Zealand Police] response teams who will nonetheless deal with them. As with other social harms caused by cannabis, the solution is to be found in long-term, sustained, health-focussed campaigns."

She notes that the most substantive discussion of general drug use and harm is the New Zealand Law Commission review of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1975. "The report finds a relationship between [drug](#) use early in life and criminality, as well as general poor achievements as an adult. Drug use is associated with social and economic disadvantage, and cannabis use may equally cause, and reinforce, socioeconomic disadvantage."

Changes to the legal status of cannabis in New Zealand may arise swiftly, with limited time for police and the health sector to prepare, says Ms Drake.

Her research recommends that if New Zealand considers a law change, "it should be accompanied by considerable social support mechanisms focussing on the reduction of health, social and criminal harms caused by disordered cannabis use."

Ms Drake gained a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English and Russian from Canterbury University. She worked for 10 years in police and

government intelligence, currently has a role in training and leadership at the Royal Police College and was requested by the National Drug Intelligence Bureau, a multi-agency group hosted by the New Zealand Police in their National Intelligence Centre, to undertake the research.

Ms Drake presented her research at the Australasian Drug and Alcohol Strategy Conference in Wellington earlier this month. She graduated on Friday at the Wellington campus ceremony for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Provided by Massey University

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