



Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor  
Kaitohutohu Mātanga Pūtaiao Matua ki te Pirimia

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EVIDENCE SUMMARY: Cannabis - At a glance

**Author:**

OPMCSA

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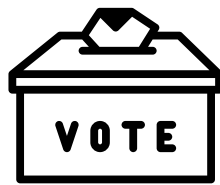
# What might happen if you vote...

## ✔ Yes?

We can look overseas to places with legalised cannabis for clues.

But the evidence for overseas outcomes is uncertain, reflecting the short time since reforms were made, different regulatory approaches, and a commercial industry that isn't yet fully established. Pre-existing or time-lagged trends in health and social impacts also contribute. The evidence may never become completely 'certain' and interpretation will require value judgements.

The Aotearoa New Zealand experience will depend on our unique environment and specific regulatory approach and implementation.



## ✔ No?

We can look at the outcomes from our current drug law.

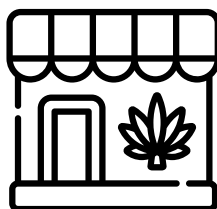
Under current law, cannabis is criminally prohibited (except for the **separate legal medical scheme**). These outcomes are likely to stay the same or follow recent trends.

Different outcomes may arise from the progressive softening of the law, including recent changes that give police discretion to take a more health-oriented approach to drug possession rather than prosecution. However, cannabis will remain illegal. **Discriminatory application of the law disproportionately affects Māori, young men and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds** when it comes to enforcement.

## ✔ Yes?

- **Legal cannabis production and supply controlled** through a tightly regulated but large-scale commercial for-profit industry, with regulation of the type, strength and quality of products.
- Any person aged 20 or over able to buy a maximum of 14 grams per day of dried cannabis (or its equivalent) from licensed stores supplied by licensed growers.
- Any person aged 20 or over allowed to grow two plants at home, up to a maximum of four per household.
- Advertising and promotion not allowed. In practice, this might be difficult to control on social media and wider internet platforms.
- **Overseas experience suggests that illegal production and supply is likely to continue at a reduced level.** The level may depend on how legal cannabis is priced.

### Production and supply of cannabis



## ✔ No?

- Cannabis production and supply remains exclusively in the hands of illegal operations.
- Those who wish to use cannabis need to get it from illegal sources and commit a criminal act.
- No control over the type, strength and quality of cannabis products, who can purchase it, and how much an individual can buy.

Read the full evidence summary: [pmcsa.ac.nz/topics/cannabis](https://pmcsa.ac.nz/topics/cannabis)

# What might happen if you vote...

## Cannabis use



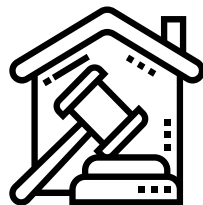
### ✔ Yes?

- We can expect 'normalisation' of cannabis use, which may lead to increased use.
- **Overseas experience shows mixed evidence** for use among youth and preliminary evidence of increasing cannabis use among older age groups and university students, following legalisation.
- Despite regulation, commercial sellers will likely seek to expand use or broaden available products to gain market share and profits. This may involve dropping the price of cannabis.

### ✔ No?

- **Most New Zealanders try cannabis at some point.**
- 15% of adults reported using cannabis at least once in the past year (2018/19 data).
- Young people are the biggest users with 29% reporting past-year use (ages 15-24, 2018/19 data).
- Current usage patterns likely to continue.

## Cannabis enforcement and criminal justice



### ✔ Yes?

- Cannabis-related enforcement not necessary for now-legal activities such as adult use of cannabis and limited home growing.
- Enforcement changes would be **felt most significantly by Māori and young men.**
- People under 20 caught with cannabis would not be convicted of a crime and would instead receive a health-based response or pay a fine.
- Enforcement for remaining offences would vary and may continue to discriminate against Māori and young men.
- Focusing enforcement on health-related offences (e.g. impaired driving) may impact public health outcomes, but depends on police priorities.

### ✔ No?

- **Current laws result in a substantial number of people being subject to cannabis-related enforcement and criminal convictions,** which may lead to social harm.
- Rates of arrests for cannabis have declined substantially in the past ten years and this trend is expected to continue under **recent reforms to the Misuse of Drugs Act.**
- The number of convictions is also likely to decrease over time.
- Enforcement may continue to discriminate against Māori and young men.

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# What might happen if you vote...

## Social and community outcomes

### ✔ Yes?

- **Weakened illegal market and reduced criminal convictions alleviate wider social harms**, felt most strongly in marginalised communities.
- **Tax revenue from legal sales could support community resources and development**, but this would be subject to government spending decisions.
- Depending on how the regulations are applied, poor outcomes may emerge from:
  - high density or concentrated cannabis retail outlets in vulnerable neighbourhoods,
  - withholding new economic development opportunities and benefits from already marginalised communities,
  - people involved in illegal markets being unable to benefit from legal market due to compliance costs or other barriers, and
  - the price of legal cannabis driving people to continue to use the illegal market.
- Government revenue from legal cannabis sales provides an opportunity for wider community benefit.



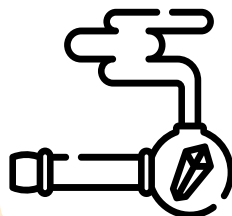
### ✔ No?

- **The illegal production and supply of cannabis is embedded in deprived communities** and is likely to continue to:
  - give rise to and boost organised and opportunistic crime,
  - compromise social wellbeing and safety, especially in vulnerable populations, and
  - cause disproportionate and intergenerational social harms.
- People who are convicted for cannabis use – often young people – continue to be socially stigmatised. The lifelong impacts make it difficult to get jobs, find housing, travel and be approved for loans.

## Effect on other drug use

### ✔ Yes?

- **Preliminary overseas experience shows mixed evidence** for changes in use of alcohol, tobacco and other psychoactive substances with legal cannabis.



### ✔ No?

- Using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs with cannabis is common, can be harmful, and is likely to continue.

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# What might happen if you vote...

## Public health outcomes

### ✔ Yes?

- Making cannabis legal reduces some but not all risks for cannabis-related health harms. These are most often experienced by frequent and/or high-potency product users, people who start using cannabis young, and those who have a pre-existing or family history of mental health conditions or substance use disorders.
- Products available for legal purchase will be safer in some respects (e.g. composition-labelled, dose-controlled, quality -regulated). However, **legal markets to date feature high-potency products**, which carry some risk.
- Information, education and guidance on safer-use practices will be directly provided (e.g. health warnings on products and at outlets).
- If the legal supply system includes high potency products, low prices and abundant retail outlets, use and harm may increase.
- At the same time, illegal markets supplying mostly high-risk products are likely to remain active and competitive.



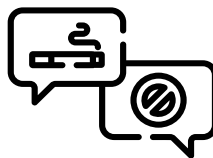
### ✔ No?

- **A minority of users experience cannabis-related health harms**, particularly those who use cannabis young, often, use high-potency products, or have a pre-existing or family history of mental health conditions or substance use disorders.
- Having an illegal and unregulated market enables **some product characteristics or ways of using that contribute to health risks** (e.g. steadily increasing potency, contamination, no checks on product type or safety, no regulation of age of consumer).
- Information, education and guidance on safer-use practices are hindered by its criminal status, with lack of awareness of how to reduce risk or limited access to the professional help/treatment for people who need it, including parents of young users.

## Availability and use of help services

### ✔ Yes?

- **Reduced stigma may make people more likely to seek help** or treatment if experiencing cannabis problems.
- Normalisation of cannabis use could change what is considered problematic use, making some people less likely to seek help when they need it.
- Positioning cannabis use as a health issue means it may be easier to get help and treatment to address problematic use, if the government allocates required resources and funding.



### ✔ No?

- The stigma of cannabis being illegal may:
  - continue to **prevent some people from seeking help**, and
  - hinder other interventions that would openly educate about risks or help people use cannabis more safely.
- Limited professional help and treatment services available for people who have problems with cannabis use, especially young people, unless the government resources these more adequately.

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# What might happen if you vote...

## Government spending and revenue

### ✔ Yes?

- **Opportunity to generate significant tax revenue** and jobs from cannabis production and sales.
- Opportunity to save some money on enforcement, but active targeting of remaining offences to achieve public health and safety goals would have a cost.
- Additional spending needed to implement, monitor and manage new regulatory systems and additional help services for users.



### ✔ No?

- The government may continue to spend substantially more on cannabis enforcement than cannabis-focused prevention or treatment services.
- Remains impossible to generate tax revenue or benefit from economic development related to cannabis production and sales.

## Research and monitoring

### ✔ Yes?

- Some barriers to much-needed research removed, allowing for better understanding of use, products and effects.
- The law would be reviewed after five years. To maximise desirable impacts, the government would need to provide resources to closely monitor outcomes and adjust the regulations as necessary.



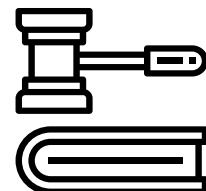
### ✔ No?

- Studying cannabis use, products and effects remains difficult, despite the need for better data and a stronger evidence base.
- Recent legalisation of medicinal cannabis in many places is already reducing barriers to research.

## Legal-political considerations

### ✔ Yes?

- Cannabis laws will be more consistent with the legal provisions for alcohol and tobacco, but will have stricter regulations.
- Regulatory approach for cannabis will be more consistent with personal freedom to choose to use cannabis.



### ✔ No?

- Cannabis prohibition laws remain generally inconsistent with those for alcohol and tobacco.
- Law infringes on the rights of individuals to choose to use cannabis for personal benefit (inconsistent with alcohol and tobacco regulation, but consistent with other laws that exist to limit harm to individuals and society).

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