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Prevalence and issues relating to cannabis use among prison inmates: Key findings from Australian research since 2001

Jason Payne, Sarah Macgregor & Hayley McDonald

Introduction

The nexus between drug use and crime has long been the subject of international and Australian criminological research. In particular, research has focused on the link between drug use and high volume recidivist offending, the results of which have, over the years, inspired a range of policy responses which aim to tackle the problem of drug misuse at all levels of the criminal justice system. Early intervention with young people, it is hoped, will reduce the prevalence and severity of drug use among future generations while limiting any negative consequences of their contact with the criminal justice system. For those more heavily dependent drug users, drug courts and other more intensive interventions are developed with the hopes of reducing drug dependency and thereby minimising the associated criminal consequences.

In Australia, prison populations have been a key source of data for examining the nexus between drugs and crime, although in many cases the research has focused primarily on the so-called 'harder' drug types such as heroin, amphetamine, cocaine and ecstasy. Information about cannabis use is often collected and reported, but usually only within the broader context of other illicit drug use. For this reason, this paper provides a consolidation of research findings about cannabis from research and other data collection projects conducted within Australian prisons since 2000.

Overview of key findings

- the vast majority of prison inmates have used cannabis at least once in their life. Self-report estimates of lifetime use are relatively consistent across studies, ranging from 81 per cent to 88 per cent
- the prevalence of lifetime cannabis among prisoners use varies by gender; however the differences are inconsistent. In some studies males have a higher rate than females, while in others the opposite is found
- although only one national study has examined the juvenile detainee population, the results suggest higher rates of lifetime cannabis use when compared with adult prisoners
- around one-in-three prison inmates report having used cannabis in the past 6-12 months, typically before entering prison. Estimates of recent use vary between 60 and 70 per cent
- the majority of prisoners who had used cannabis in the months leading up to their imprisonment did so at least once a day – often more

- conservative estimates suggest that approximately one-in-three prisoners reported using cannabis while in custody. Estimates vary between 30 and 50 per cent. Drug users in prison more often than not report cannabis as the first drug they used while in custody
- two in every five prisoners released from custody expect to use cannabis upon their release and the expectation of post-release drug use was a significant predictor of re-incarceration. Female prisoners were less likely than males to have intentions of using cannabis upon their release
- around half of all male prisoners released from custody report using cannabis after being released. Females were less likely than males to have used cannabis post-release

Detailed project overview

Drug Use Careers of Offenders Study (2001-2005)

Funded under the National Illicit Drug Strategy (NIDS) and co-ordinated by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), the Drug Use Careers of Offenders (DUCO) study involved a survey of prisoners across three waves of data collection – adult males (2001), adult females (2003) and male and female juvenile detainees (2005).

The adult male study was conducted in four jurisdictions – Western Australia (WA), the Northern Territory (NT), Tasmania (TAS) and Queensland (QLD). The survey incorporated an interviewer-administered questionnaire, along with the collection of administrative data from the relevant correctional authority in each jurisdiction. Participants were selected using a geographically stratified sampling procedure, except in Tasmania where a complete census was attempted. In all, 2135 prisoners were interviewed (Makkai & Payne 2003).

Key findings related to cannabis included:

- 81 per cent of adult male prisoners had used cannabis at least once in their life, while 62 per cent had used cannabis in the six months prior to their incarceration
- of those using cannabis in the six months prior to their incarceration, 68 per cent were using at least once a day, although the majority reported using several times a day
- regular property offenders and regular offenders of both property and violent offences (identified through self-report) had the highest prevalence of cannabis use in the six months prior to their incarceration (70% and 78%, respectively)

The adult female DUCO study was conducted in six jurisdictions – SA, NT, WA, Victoria (VIC), QLD and TAS. Given the relatively small number of female prisoners in Australia a complete census was attempted in all six jurisdictions. Each female detainee participated in a structured questionnaire administered by a trained interviewer. In all, 470 interviews were completed (Johnson 2004).

Key findings related to cannabis included:

- 78 per cent of female prisoners had used cannabis at least once in their life, while 49 per cent reported using cannabis in the six months prior to being arrested. These results were marginally lower than recorded for male prisoners in 2001
- 40 per cent of those who had used cannabis in the six months prior to being arrested reported they were current regular users of cannabis and of those who were regular users, 45 per cent reported they were using cannabis several times a day
- among the detainees who had used drugs at the time of their offence, 30 per cent reported that they were using cannabis

The juvenile DUCO study was conducted across all Australian jurisdictions, and as with the adult female component of the study a complete census of the juvenile detainee population was attempted. In all, 371 juveniles participated in the study (Prichard & Payne 2005).

In terms of cannabis use, it was found that:

- 94 per cent of juvenile detainees had used cannabis at least once in their life, while 84 per cent had used cannabis in the six months prior to being arrested
- 63 per cent were classified as current-regular users of cannabis in the six months prior to being detained
- of those who were current regular users, 74 per cent reported that they were using cannabis several times a day
- among the juveniles who were under the influence of drugs at the time of their offence, 75 per cent reported being affected by cannabis
- cannabis was most often the illicit drug first used by juvenile detainees; however engagement in crime typically preceded first cannabis use

Survey of prisoners in NSW (2007-08)

Funded by the National Drug Strategy, the 2007-08 NSW prisoner survey (Kevin 2010) interviewed 358 prisoners (306 males and 52 females), examining patterns of drug use during the six months prior to and during the current terms of their imprisonment. Interviewing, using a structured questionnaire, took place during 2007-2008 (Kevin 2010).


With regard to cannabis use, key findings were:

- 53.6 per cent of male and 48.1 per cent of female prisoners had used cannabis in the six months prior to being imprisoned
- 31.7 per cent of male prisoners and 34.6 per cent of female prisoners had used cannabis while in custody during their current term of imprisonment
- 31.4 per cent of male prisoners and 25.0 per cent of female prisoners had used cannabis daily in the six months prior to their current imprisonment term

The Post-Release Experience of Prisoners in Queensland (PREP-Q) (2006)

Funded by the Criminology Research Council (CRC) in 2003-04, the Queensland Alcohol and Drug Research and Education Centre (QADREC) examined the experiences of prisoners following their release from custody. In particular, the project aimed to identify the range of factors considered important in increasing the risk of re-incarceration, including drug and alcohol use.

The PREP-Q project was a longitudinal study of a sample of male and female prisoners soon to be released from custody in Queensland. Participants were interviewed prior to their release from custody and then again on two occasions after release. The survey instrument included a range of questions and measures, including the Alcohol Use Disorders and Identification Test (AUDIT), the SF-8 Health Survey and the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI). Pre-release interviews were conducted face-to-face no earlier than four weeks prior to release. Post-release interviews were conducted via telephone; the first after an average of 34 days and the second after an average of 120 days. Post release interviews were conducted with 91 participants at the first follow-up (56% of the original sample) and 77 participants at the second follow-up (48% of the original sample).



Key findings relating to cannabis included:

- 88 per cent of prisoners reported a lifetime history of cannabis use – with male prisoners more likely than female prisoners to have ever used cannabis (94% cf. 75%)
- two in five male prisoners (40%) and one in five female prisoners (19%) self-reported an intention to use cannabis after their release. Some prisoners (an additional 8% of males and 3% of females) did not report an intention to use cannabis, but nevertheless expected that they would do so after their release
- at the first post-release follow-up, after an average of 34 days from release, 44 per cent of prisoners (49% of males and 33% of females) had used cannabis
- at the second follow-up, after an average of 120 days from release, 48 per cent of prisoners (57% of males and 31% of females) had recently used cannabis (in the four weeks prior to interview)
- prisoners who reported an expectation to use illicit drugs (including but not limited to cannabis) after release were more likely to be re-incarcerated

NSW Inmate Health Survey (2009)

The 2009 NSW Inmate Health Survey collected information from 996 randomly selected inmates, both male and female from 30 correctional centres across NSW. Inmates were asked a wide range of questions including imprisonment history, demographics, education, employment and occupation prior to entering prison, physical and mental health status, past mental health status, use of prison health services as well as their use of drugs (Indig et al. 2010). The survey was administered using a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing strategy. Participating prisoners also took part in a physical health examination and blood and urine tests.

Key findings related to cannabis use included:

- 81 per cent of prisoners (84% of males and 72% of females) had used cannabis at least once in their life
- in the year before imprisonment 26 per cent (26% of males and 23% of females) had used cannabis daily or almost daily
- one in three prisoners (33% of males and 26% of females) had used cannabis at least once while in prison
- of those prisoners who reported being intoxicated at the time of their offence, 19 per cent (21% of males and 12% of females) reported having used cannabis

Health of Prisoner Evaluation (HoPE) Pilot Project (2009)

Funded by Edith Cowan University, the HoPE study surveyed 146 inmates from one male prison and one female prison in Western Australia. Using an interviewer administered questionnaire, the HoPE study aimed to investigate the health of prison inmates, and examined patterns of drug use among prisoners, with a focus on injecting drug use. Key findings for all drug types, including cannabis, were disaggregated by gender and Indigenous status:

- 84 per cent of prisoners (95% of Indigenous females; 86% of Indigenous males; 79% of non-Indigenous females and 78% of non-indigenous males) had tried cannabis at least once in their life
- in the year prior to imprisonment cannabis use was reported by approximately 65 per cent of Indigenous females; 75 per cent of Indigenous males; 55 per cent of non-Indigenous females and 50 per cent of non-Indigenous males

- approximately 18 per cent of Indigenous females; 26 per cent of Indigenous males; 11 per cent of non-Indigenous females and 11 per cent of non-Indigenous males self-reported being dependent on cannabis
- cannabis use in prison was reported by approximately one third of the inmates surveyed – 28 per cent of Indigenous females; 49 per cent of Indigenous males; 27 per cent of non-Indigenous females and 38 per cent of non-Indigenous males reported use

Health of Australia's Prisoners – National Prisoner Health Survey (2010)

The Health of Australia's Prisoners 2010 report was released in 2011, based on data from the 2010 National Prisoner Health Census. The Census included prison inmates from all Australian jurisdictions except New South Wales and Victoria (AIHW 2011). Data were collected from all prison entrants, all prisoners who used a prison clinic and all prisoners who were taking medication prescribed to them in the participating jurisdictions. Different survey instruments were used for each population and key findings as they relate to cannabis included:

- 51 per cent of prison entrants had used cannabis in the last 12 months
- the prevalence of recent cannabis use was roughly equal for male and female inmates (52% of males vs. 49% of females)
- inmates aged 18-24 were most likely to have used cannabis in the last 12 months (60%), while those aged 45 years and older were least likely (28%)
- 54 per cent of Indigenous and 50 per cent of non-indigenous prison entrants had used cannabis in the last 12 months

Key implications for corrections and courts

- the prevalence rates of lifetime cannabis use among prison inmates are high, with many reporting use in the six months before being arrested. Although much attention is given to other drugs such as heroin, amphetamine and cocaine, cannabis continues to be the illicit drug most likely to have been used by prisoners
- the majority of prisoners who reported using cannabis in the months prior to their incarceration used the drug daily. Cannabis dependence is a significant issue in Australia (with about one in ten people who try the drug at least once in their lifetime becoming dependent on it) and, as a result, prisoners who are identified as having a cannabis problem may need assistance to help them quit. There are a range of treatment options now available to assist cannabis users, many of which can be provided within the prison system
- due to the high rate of cannabis use amongst prisoners, the link between the use of the drug and mental health problems is an issue that must continue to be considered and addressed appropriately. Most importantly, information on risk factors such as genetic vulnerability (i.e. close family with depression, psychosis, bipolar disorder or anxiety) or having an existing mental health issue, needs to be provided to prisoners who are using or considering using the drug
- up-to-date, high quality information on cannabis, the harms associated with its use, as well as treatment options needs to continue to be disseminated to those working with prison inmates to ensure that those who want assistance with their cannabis use are provided with best practice interventions that are the most likely to lead to successful outcomes and assist in reducing recidivism



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