Cannabis Policy: An International Perspective

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Aims

- Describe international trends in prevalence

- Describe international trends in policy

- Situate Australia within these; and

- Explore the link between policy and cannabis (use, price, arrest)

- Pose some questions...

International cannabis policy

- Marginal to main interests of international drug control (heroin, cocaine, amphetamine)

YET

1. Most commonly used illicit drug
   - — 160 million people (UNODC, 2005)
2. Represents largest financial component of illicit drug market
   - — Cannabis €70 billion p.a.
   - — Cocaine €6-9 billion p.a.
   - — Heroin €20 billion p.a.

   (2005 estimate: "A Report on Global Illicit Drug Markets")
3. Highest rates of arrest (cf other drugs)

International trends in cannabis use

- Mainly declining?

1. European trends
2. USA trends
3. Australian trends
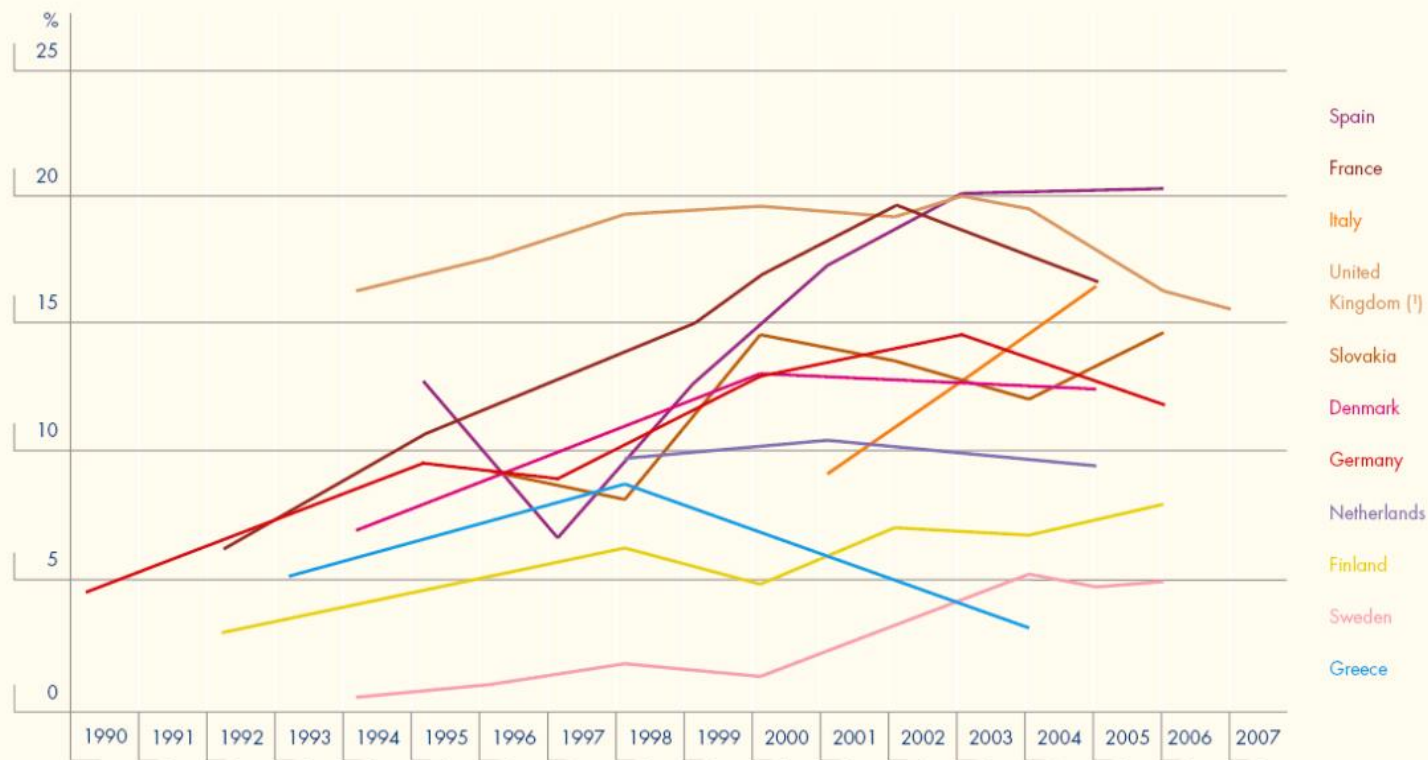
European trends: average across 20 countries
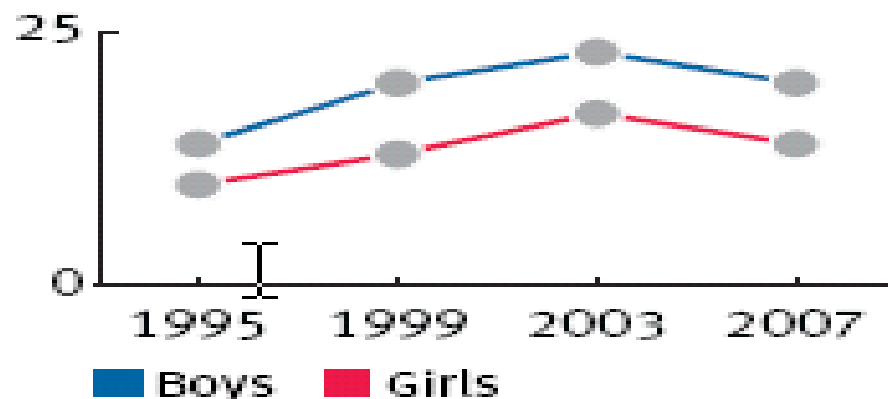
Lifetime use of marijuana or hashish by gender. 1995–2007. Percentages. Averages for 20 countries.

ESPAD data, n=100,000. 16 years of age, lifetime cannabis use

Europe: general pop surveys (last year use, 15-34 yr olds)

Figure 4: Trends in last year prevalence of cannabis use among young adults (aged 15–34)

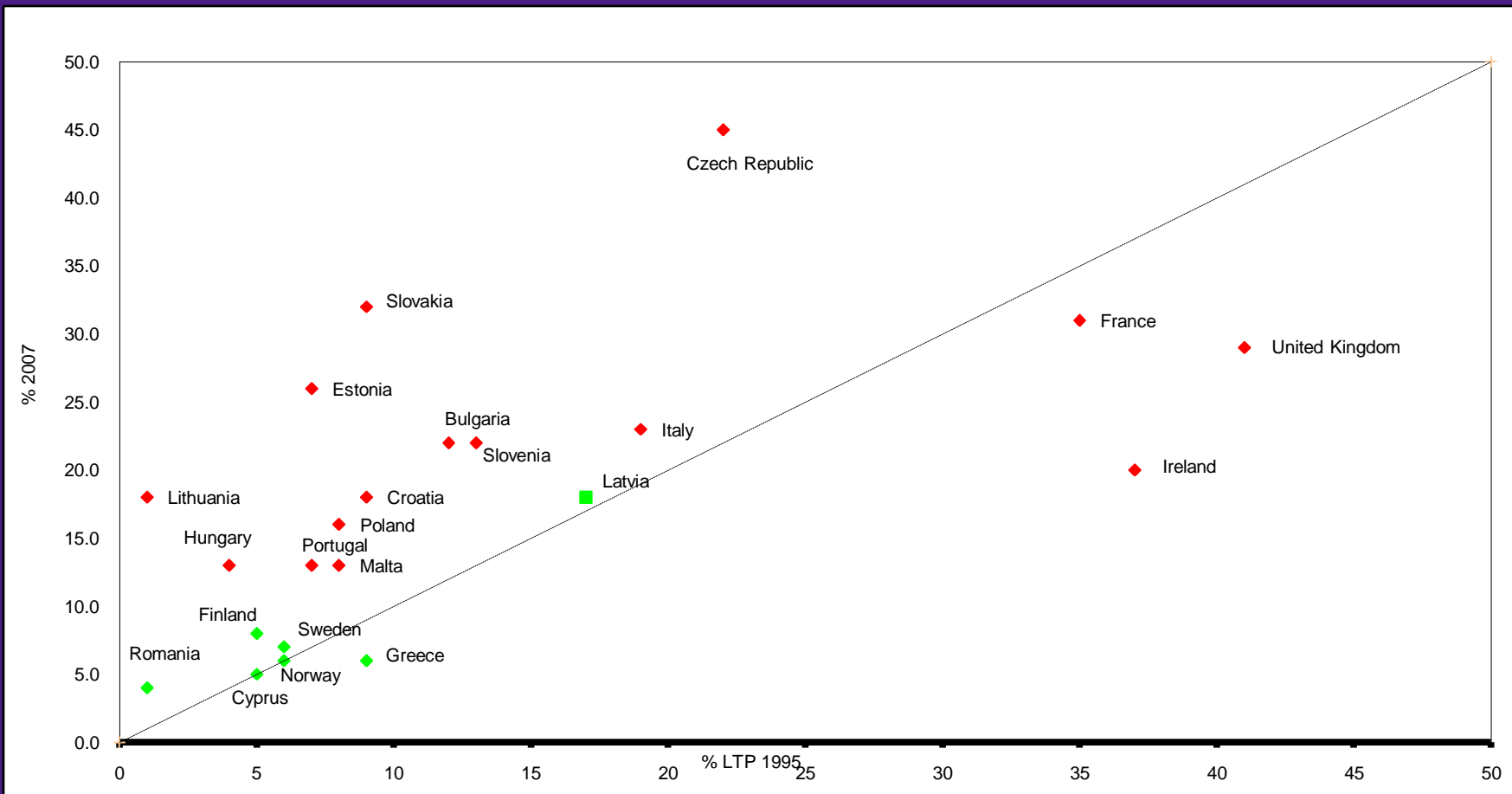(¹) England and Wales.
NB: See Figure GPS-4 in the 2008 statistical bulletin for further information.
Sources: Reitox national reports (2007), taken from population surveys, reports or scientific articles.

Change in cannabis use (lifetime) 15-16 yr olds 1995-2007

Squares above the line = increase
Squares below the line = decrease
Red squares = 4 % or more increase or decrease in the prevalence

UK: lifetime & past 30 day use, school students

ESPAD data, 17 year olds

USA: last year cannabis use, 17-18 yr olds

% Past year use

Monitoring the Future, 17-18 year olds

Australia: cannabis use in last year
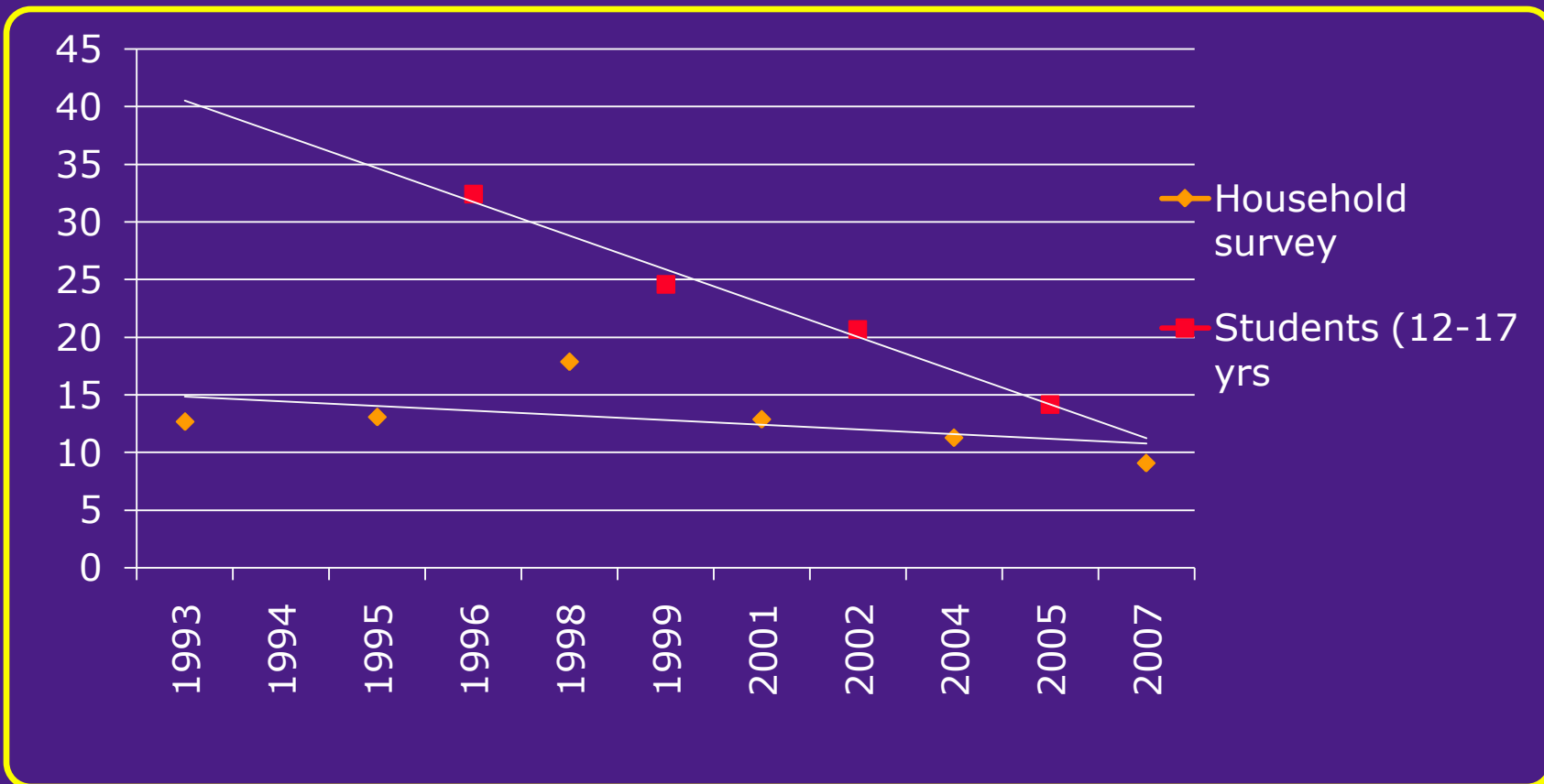
Household survey (NDSHS) and school students survey (ASSAD)

Summary

- Mainly declining? Perhaps
- Australia has "led" the decline 1996/1998
- UK similar pattern
- Europe declines 2003 onwards
- USA – slower and lesser decline
- Depends on timeframe, data issues, which comparisons
- But WHY?

Why?

- Assuming we agree on a decline, why?…

- Mental health consequences more widespread

- Tipping point: bad press/deterrence

- Effective information, education, treatment availability

- Tobacco control

- Other drug substitution (alcohol, ecstasy)

- Cyclical epidemic trends

- Legal status...

International trends in cannabis policy

- Largely harmonising towards reduced penalties

- Largely focussed on use, not supply

- Difficult to categorise …

Categorisation of regimes

- Full prohibition

- Prohibition with cautioning or diversion ('depenalisation')

- Prohibition with civil penalties ('decriminilisation')

- Partial prohibition, including:

  a) *'De facto'* legalisation
  b) *'De jure'* legalisation

- Medical marijuana control

Issues in categorisation

- Not "clean" categories: much heterogeneity

- "Law in books" vs "Law in action"

- Threshold amounts vary

- Countries vs states vs localities

- Discretionary police powers

- Arrest vs consequences after arrest

Categorisation....

[Depenalisation]	[Decriminalisation]	[Legalisation]	
Prohibition with cautioning or diversion A	Prohibition with civil penalties B	De facto legalisation (prohibition with expediency) C	De Jure Legalisation D
→ France	→ Belgium	→ Netherlands	→ Alaska (USA)
→ Australia NSW/VIC/QLD/TAS	→ Australia WA/ACT/SA/NT	→ Germany	→ Colombia
→ Canada	→ Italy	→ Austria	→ India
→ Britain	→ Czech Republic	→ Spain	→ ?Mexico
→ USA: 11 states	→ Portugal		
→ Brazil	→ Denmark		

Source: Global Cannabis Commission Report, Sept 2008

Relationships between policy and outcomes ?

- Rates of use

- Price

- Rates of arrest

Lifetime use, among younger age groups, in 8 nations (ca. 2004)

DPMP
Drug Policy Modelling Program

Country (age range)		Lifetime	Last Year
USA (26-34)	A, E	56.7	19.9
Canada (25-34)	A	56.8	18.0
New Zealand (25-34)	A, B	62.0	18.0
France (15-34)	A	43.6	16.7
UK (15-34)	A	41.4	16.3
Netherlands (15-34)	C	32.3	9.5
Sweden (15-34)	E	19.1	4.8
Australia (20-29)		54.5	26.0

NDARC

Price of cannabis US dollars (ca. 2005)

DPMP
Drug Policy Modelling Program

Country		Price per gram
USA	A,E	12.30
Sweden	E	8.49
Canada	A	8.10
Germany	C	6.57
Italy	B	6.41
Switzerland	E	6.18
France	A	5.60
Netherlands	C	5.28
Spain	C	3.47
UK	A	3.36
Australia		15.26

Sources: EMCDDA, Caulkins et al. (2005).
A Report on Global Illicit Drug Markets 1998-2007

NDARC

Cannabis arrest rates for 7 countries, ca. 2005

	Per 100,000 population	Per 1000 users*
Austria	333	44
Germany	237	34
US	269	31
France	225	26
UK	206	20
Netherlands	19	3
Australia	276	24

Source: The Global Cannabis Commission Report, September 2008
*Users: estimated number of past year users from most current household survey

Conclusions

- Cannabis use rates changing, largely falling, but highly variable

- Relationship between legal status and use unclear/absent

Questions?

- Why don't we care?

- Why is the policy discourse focussed on "use" not "supply"?

- Why are rates of cannabis use changing (and in different directions for different countries)

- What's important?

  — prevalence rates?

  — harms: health, criminal justice connection?

- Why is Australia an outlier?

Further information

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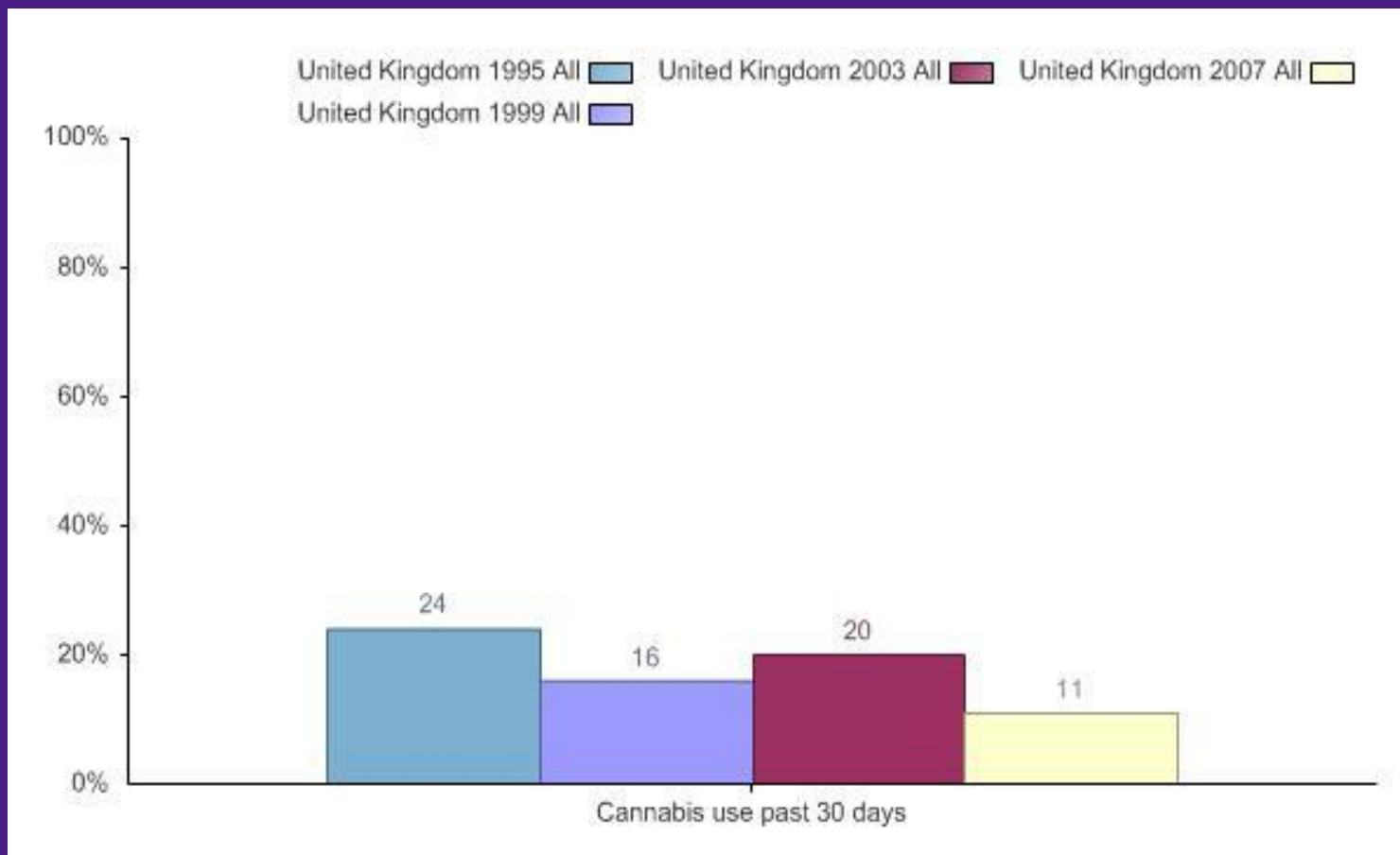National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
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DPMP Website:

http://www.dpmp.unsw.edu.au

UK; past 30 days cannabis use, school students (ESPAD data)

USA: last year cannabis use, 17-18 yr olds

Year	% past yr	Column3	Column4	Column5	Column6	Column7	Column8	Column9	Column10	Column11	Column12
1995	34.7										
1996	35.8										
1997	38.5										
1998	37.5										
1999	37.1										
2000	36.5										
2001	37										
2002	36.2										
2003	34.9										
2004	34.3										
2005	33.6										
2006	31.5										
2007	31.7										
2008	32.4										