



Impact of Cannabis Legalization on Youth Contact with the Criminal Justice System

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Project Background

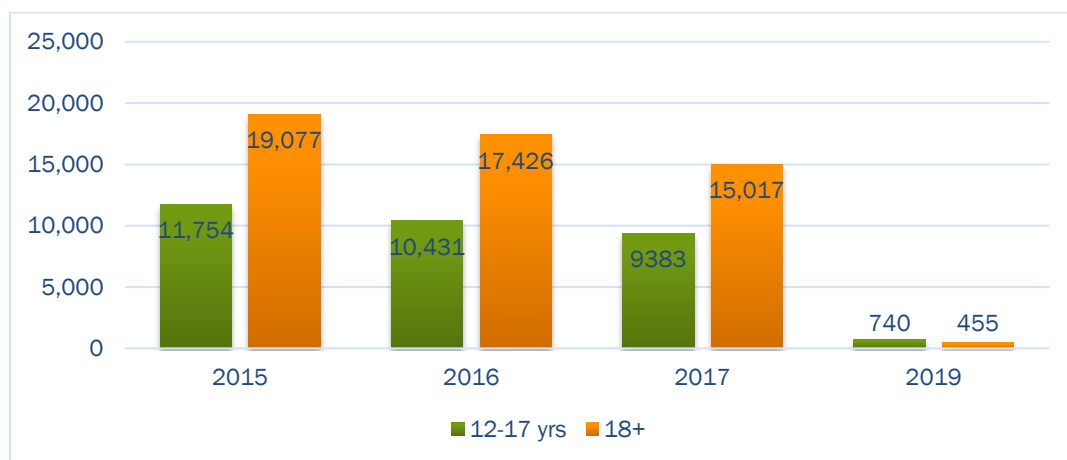
One of the primary goals of the *Cannabis Act* is to minimize youth access to cannabis and divert profits away from the illicit market. Under the Act, the possession of more than five grams of cannabis remains a criminal offence for those under 18 years of age. Youth are also now subject to new provincial sanctions for possession that are specific to each jurisdiction.

To date, little is known about the impact of the *Cannabis Act* on young people's contact with the criminal justice system. This study aimed to fill that void by determining how many young people are coming into contact with the criminal justice system, including police, courts and corrections, as a result of cannabis-related offences, and what is the nature and outcome of these contacts. Data from Jan. 1, 2015, to Dec. 31, 2019, were drawn from Statistics Canada to conduct this study.¹

Main Findings

- There was a drastic reduction, up to 97%, in cannabis possession charges following legalization, seen more in adults aged 18 and older than in youth aged 12–17 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of cannabis possession charge counts in youth (aged 12–17 years) versus adults (aged 18 years and older) across Canada pre- to post-legalization

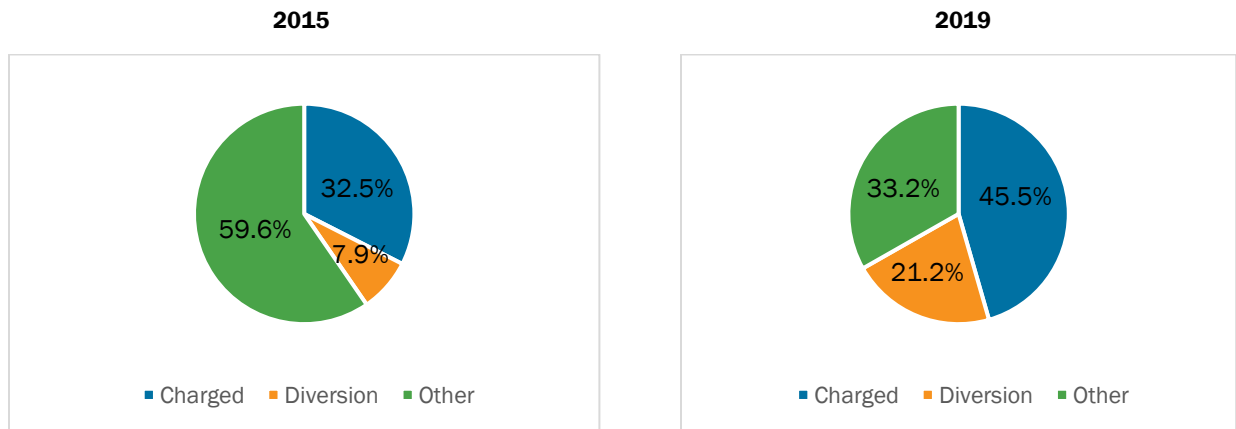


¹ More information on methods and data sources is included in the full technical report, available upon request.



- **Across the provinces and territories, there was variation in post-legalization treatment of youth charged with cannabis possession.**² British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and Quebec showed the highest youth possession charge rates, whereas Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island had the lowest rates.
- **Young people made up the majority of those charged with cannabis possession.** Youth were also more likely to face criminal charges instead of diversion or informal caution prior to legalization than following legalization.
- **Although there were fewer incidents, youth cases were more likely to result in criminal charges.** The percentage of cannabis possession cases resulting in a criminal charge increased from **32% in 2015 to 45% in 2019**. (See blue Charged in Figure 2.)
- **Youth possession cases were more likely to be diverted.** The percentage of cannabis possession cases involving a formal diversion increased from **7.9% in 2015 to 21.2% in 2019** in youth across Canada. (See orange Diversion in Figure 2.)
- **Youth possession cases were less likely to be resolved informally.** The percentage of cannabis possession cases involving an informal resolution, such as charges withdrawn, caution issued, etc., dropped from **59.6% in 2015 to 33.2% in 2019**. (See green Other in Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Percentage of cannabis-possession incidents that resulted in different outcomes pre- versus post-legalization

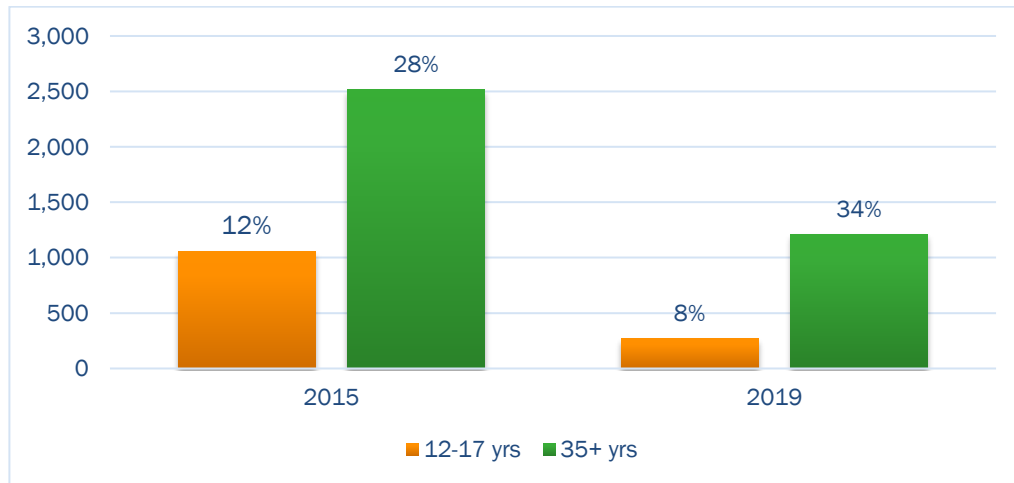


- **There were fewer trafficking and sales charges for youth compared to adults.** Unlike cannabis possession, declines in trafficking and sales charges are greatest for young offenders, 12–17 years of age (Figure 3).

² Note that all provinces and territories have established different prohibitions under their own regulations for possession of cannabis.



Figure 3. Cannabis trafficking, sales and distribution charges in Canada by age group, pre to post legalization



Main Takeaway

There has been a dramatic reduction in the number of youth charged with cannabis-related offences following legalization. This reduction is important in reducing the negative consequences associated with criminalization.

Further Research Is Needed

- To monitor whether the decrease in cannabis possession charges persists and how youth contact with the criminal justice system may evolve over time.
- To better understand youth experiences with provincial and territorial diversion programs.
- To understand whether demographic factors, such as race, influence case outcomes, which is important in evaluating whether changes associated with cannabis legalization are experienced equitably.
- To explore the systematic collection of racial data in the criminal justice system to identify and address racial disparities in cannabis-related charges.

