Cannabis Legalization Observations 2021–2022: Key Findings for Future Research

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Key Points

- Research shows movement toward the intended objectives of the *Cannabis Act* but there are still areas that require more research in a postpandemic context.

- Researchers should investigate:

    - The continued expansion of the legal cannabis market, which has yet to stabilize;

    - The growing use of different product formats, including vaping, edibles and extracts; and

    - The significant gaps in data that need to be filled to better understand the effects of the *Cannabis Act* on populations, such as racialized youth and Indigenous peoples.

- The *Cannabis Legalization: 2021–22 Observations Report* includes key findings to shape future directions for cannabis-related research, policy development and public health education.

Background

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (2022) published the *Cannabis Legalization: 2021–2022 Observations* report to provide an update on the implementation and effects of cannabis legalization in Canada. The report summarizes the effects according to the act's objectives and is intended as a resource for researchers, analysts and interested members of the public. This topic summary draws on the report to identify key findings that are relevant for future research on cannabis and the effects of legalization in Canada.

Speaking about the effects of legalization is complicated by the difficulty in untangling the extent to which effects observed after March 2020 are linked with legalization in 2018 or the COVID-19 pandemic. Close monitoring of the public health, public safety and broader social effects of legalization are essential to minimizing harms and maximizing benefits.

> **Cannabis Act Legislative Review**
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> The *Cannabis Act* requires the Minister of Health to review the effects of the act and its administration three years after coming into force. The review is in progress and will examine the effects on public health, mental health, health and consumption patterns of young people, Indigenous people and communities, and home cultivation.

Key Findings Affecting Future Research

- Despite some month-to-month fluctuation, the legal retail cannabis market continues to grow and remains years away from stability, particularly with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Growing consumer preferences for legal cannabis sources shows relative success in diversion from the illicit market. However, a barrier to research is the lack of data on the illegal market, which is difficult to collect and often unreliable.

- Dried cannabis remains dominant, with edibles experiencing the most rapid increase in units sold, closely followed by extracts. There has also been an increase in cannabis vaping, with higher rates among youth and young adults.

  - There is considerable variation in product composition (i.e., the amount of tetrahydrocannabinol, cannabidiol and other cannabinoids and terpenes) across product types, resulting in varying intoxication potential, health risks and monetary value within the permitted possession limit.

  - Future research may provide a better understanding of the effects of regulation on specific products with different consumption trends and health implications.

- There has been a dramatic reduction in charges associated with cannabis since legalization. Drug-impaired driving is one area that has seen increases in charges. However, these data include more than just cannabis, so further research is needed to separate these data.

- Evaluating the effects of the *Cannabis Act* must include an equity perspective, including equitable access to the regulated cannabis supply, market participation, and health and social effects or lack thereof, including criminal justice contacts. There are significant gaps in racial and sex or gender data needed to conduct equity-based analysis.

Reference

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (2022). *Cannabis legalization: 2021–2022 observations*. Ottawa, Ont.: Author. https://www.ccsa.ca/cannabis-legalization-2021-2022-observations-policy-brief

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