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In reply please quote:

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MEDIA RELEASE

Does prohibition deter cannabis use?

Although cannabis use is widespread and increasing in Australia, the legal prohibitions against cannabis use and/or possession do deter people from using the drug, according to new research released today by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The research, based on interviews with a representative sample of 579 18-29 year olds resident in New South Wales, found that 56 per cent of males and 49 per cent of females in New South Wales aged 18-29 have tried cannabis at some stage in their lifetime.

When asked whether they would use cannabis more frequently if it were legal, 14 per cent said that they 'definitely' or 'probably' would. Ninety-one per cent of those who currently use cannabis weekly said that they would use more cannabis if it were made legal.

The Bureau also investigated the reasons 18-29 year olds give for never using or ceasing to use cannabis. Twenty-nine per cent of those who have never used cannabis cite the illegality of cannabis as their reason for never using the drug.

Nineteen per cent of those who have ceased using cannabis cite the illegal status of the drug as their reason for no longer using it.

However although concern about the illegal status of the drug is a major factor in deterring young people from using cannabis, fear of arrest or of imprisonment do not appear to be major factors in the decision to cease using it.

Only five per cent of those who have ceased using the drug gave as a reason for stopping, the fact that they were afraid of being caught by the police. Only four per cent stated that they ceased using cannabis because they feared going to prison.

Although concern about the illegal status of cannabis was frequently cited as a reason for not using it, the most common reason cited for never using cannabis or for no longer using it were anticipated or actual dislike of the drug (47% and 52% respectively).

The second most common reason cited for never using or no longer using cannabis were health concerns (41% and 25%, respectively).

Commenting on the findings, the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, said that they suggested that prohibition is more effective in limiting drug consumption than many researchers had realised.

"Cannabis use may be widespread but the critical question for policy is whether its use would become even more widespread if the drug were legalised. The present findings suggest that it would."

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“More critically, those who would be most likely to use more cannabis if it were legalised are regular users of the drug. This is the group whose use of cannabis is mostly likely to prove harmful both to themselves and to the wider community.”

“At the same time, there is little suggestion in our results that arrest and imprisonment of cannabis users is necessary to maximise the deterrent effect of the law. On the contrary, those who cease using cannabis appear to be motivated either by dislike of it, concern about their health or concern about its illegal status.”

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