

2. Cannabis: Why we should care

2.1. Introduction

The global community is confused about cannabis. On the one hand, cannabis is controlled with the same degree of severity as heroin and cocaine under the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961. Virtually every country in the world is a party to that Convention. On the other hand, however, cannabis offences are treated far more leniently than those related to other narcotic drugs in many countries. A conflicting message is thus sent to the population and it is no wonder that public opinion becomes confused.

Rather than confronting this schism head-on, cannabis has been allowed to fall into a grey area. Technically illegal but widely de-prioritized, the drug has grown in popularity at a rate outpacing all others while simultaneously enriching those willing to break the law. A global blind-spot has developed around cannabis, and in this murk the plant itself has been transformed into something far more potent than in the past. Suddenly, the mental health impact of cannabis use has been thrown into sharp relief, and the drug with which the world has felt so familiar seems strange once again.

Coming to terms with cannabis is important because it is, by quite a wide margin, the world's most popular illicit drug. An estimated 4 per cent of the world's adult population consumes it each year, more than all the other illicit drugs combined. In some countries, more than half of the young people polled have tried it. Mankind has cultivated the plant for a variety of reasons for centuries, and it has been the subject of reams of academic research in the last 50 years alone, including recent studies of its therapeutic applications.

Given this wealth of knowledge and experience, it is rather surprising that many basic facts about the drug remain unknown. Concerned with the situation, Member States requested UNODC, in General Assembly resolution 59/160, to prepare a global market survey

on cannabis. However, when it comes to the mechanics of the market, the world's biggest illicit drug is actually the least understood. In contrast to drug crops like coca and opium poppy, very little is known about the extent of cannabis cultivation around the world. In fact, few Governments can confidently give an estimate of the scale of cultivation in their own countries. In the United States, for example, a country with both resources and a strong infrastructure for drug control, official estimates of the extent of domestic cultivation vary by more than a factor of six. Even if the number of hectares under cannabis were documented, there has been little study of how much drug product these fields would yield. As a result, global production estimates remain highly tentative.

There are several reasons why these questions are so difficult to answer. Unlike other drug crops, cannabis can be grown virtually anywhere, including indoors, and there are very few countries where it can be definitively said that cannabis is *not* cultivated. Moreover, cannabis is both easy to grow and highly productive, yielding a large quantity of ready-to-use drug per plant. As a result, many users can, and do, produce their own supply. Current illicit crop monitoring techniques, such as satellite surveillance, are of little use in assessing cultivation taking place in private homes and small plots in communities spread across the globe. In addition, there remain unanswered questions about basic aspects of cannabis use, such as the precise amounts bought and consumed by users.

Many of these issues could be cleared up with appropriate targeted research. The fact that this research has not been done reflects the global ambiguity on cannabis. These political attitudes reflect popular perceptions that cannabis is different from other controlled substances. Indeed, many of the risks associated with other illicit drugs are not an issue with cannabis. It is nearly impos-

sible to die of an overdose of cannabis. Because it is relatively cheap in most markets, crimes associated with acquiring money for cannabis dependency are limited. In many parts of the developed world, cannabis is regarded as a soporific, and the behaviour of the intoxicated as humorous, not dangerous. For many, it is a point of faith that cannabis is harmless, the victim of relentless disinformation.

It is true that much of the early material on cannabis is now considered inaccurate, and that a series of studies in a range of countries have exonerated cannabis of many of the charges levelled against it. But the latest research indicates that the pendulum may have swung too far in the opposite direction. There are serious mental health consequences associated with cannabis, including a significant risk of dependency, precipitation and aggravation of psychosis, and acute dysphoric episodes. These risks appear to be higher for people who start consuming cannabis during adolescence. Each year, thousands of people seek medical attention for problems related to their cannabis use, and this number appears to be growing. Cannabis is not the harmless herb often portrayed, but a psychoactive drug that deserves to be taken seriously.

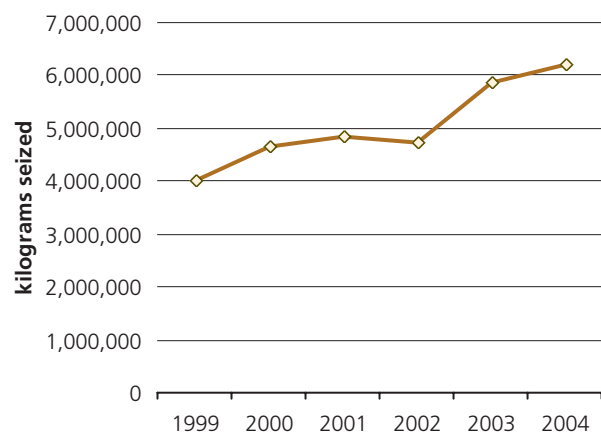
One reason these serious effects are only being appreciated now is that they appear to be related to the growth of high-potency cannabis in many countries where such research is commonly done. For the last several decades, cannabis breeders and cultivation experts have laboured to transform the plant, creating a much more potent and productive version of the drug previously reviewed. These developments were reviewed, along with other aspects of the cannabis market, in a double issue of the *Bulletin on Narcotics* (Volume XLIX, Nos.1 and 2, 1997; Volume L, Nos.1 and 2, 1998). The situation has advanced considerably since that time. High-potency cannabis may be responsible for the growing number of people seeking help for cannabis problems in developed countries around the world. Although most of the cannabis consumed globally is grown the traditional way, the problems associated with the 'new' cannabis may simply be large-print versions of issues not recognized before.

2.2. The world's biggest drug market is growing and uncharted

All available indicators suggest that global cannabis production, after having fallen in the late 1980s (mainly due to large-scale eradications in Latin America), rose

again in the 1990s and continues rising in the new millennium. The volumes of cannabis seized by the police internationally have been increasing since the early 1990s, and surveys show that global demand has also increased. An estimated 162 million people used cannabis in 2004, over 10 per cent more than in the late 1990s. According to expert opinions solicited from Member States in 2004, far more countries felt that cannabis use was increasing (59 per cent of 97 countries responding) than declining (13 per cent) in 2004. In the last decade, the consensus is that cannabis use has been growing faster than the use of cocaine or opiates.

Fig. 1: Global cannabis seizures



Sources: Annual Reports Questionnaire Data.

Exactly how widespread is cannabis cultivation? One way to find out is to ask the law enforcement authorities in every country in the world whether cannabis is grown in their country, and this is precisely what the UNODC does. Each year, UNODC receives responses from Member States to its Annual Reports Questionnaire (ARQ), a survey of national Governments on their local drug situations. The ARQ contains questions about the extent of cannabis cultivation and use. Most are unable to give estimates on the extent of cannabis cultivation in their countries, and those that do often give questionable responses. But quite a few admit that cannabis is produced in their countries, and their other responses are revealing as well.

Over the 1994-2004 period, 82 countries provided UNODC with cannabis production estimates. For comparison, only six provided estimates for coca-leaf