

**SPECIAL SECTION:  
CANNABIS EXPIATION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

# **Public awareness, knowledge and attitudes regarding the CEN system in South Australia**

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## **Abstract**

A sample of 605 South Australian residents was surveyed in 1997 regarding the Cannabis Expiation Notice (CEN) System. Thirty-nine per cent had ever used cannabis and 14.5% used cannabis at least once a year. While only 17% knew of the CEN scheme, 76% were familiar with the 'on-the-spot fine' scheme. There was confusion about the legal status of two expiable offences; 24% thought possession of less than 100 g of cannabis was legal and 53% thought growing three plants was legal. Only 40% knew that the two expiable offences involved some legal sanction. Regarding attitudes to cannabis law, the majority thought that growing 15 plants, selling 25 g for profit, possession of less than 100 g by a juvenile and driving while affected by cannabis should remain illegal. Eighty per cent thought medical use of cannabis should be legal. Half of the sample thought that growing three plants and possession of less than 100 g of cannabis should be legal and most of those who thought the two offences should be illegal said a fine was the appropriate penalty. Most people (57%) thought the cannabis laws should either remain as they are or become less strict, indicating general support for expiation. [Heale P, Hawks D, Lenton S. Public awareness, knowledge and attitudes regarding the CEN system in South Australia. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2000;19:271–280]

**Key words:** cannabis, decriminalization, legislation, South Australia, public opinion.

## **Introduction**

Cannabis laws in most Australian states are variants of total prohibition with criminal sanctions. However, South Australia (SA) is one of three Australian jurisdictions that have introduced civil (i.e. non-

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Received and accepted for publication April 2000.

criminal) penalties for minor cannabis-related offences [1]. The South Australian system, known as the Cannabis Expiation Notice (or CEN scheme), was introduced in April 1987. Under this scheme, people detected committing minor cannabis offences are issued with an 'on-the-spot' fine. No criminal penalty is incurred or conviction recorded if the fine is paid within the prescribed time [2-4]. The Expiation of Offences Act 1996 [5], brought into operation in February 1997, also provides for the expiation of an offence in cases of financial hardship by payment in instalments over a longer period of time or by undertaking community service work in lieu of the fine.

Offences that may be dealt with under the CEN scheme include the possession and use of small amounts of cannabis (less than 100 g of cannabis or 20 g of cannabis resin), possession of a smoking implement and cultivation of less than 10 plants for personal use [6]. Those detected committing a major offence remain liable for criminal prosecution [7,8]. The system does not apply to juveniles, who must still appear before the Children's Court or Children's Aid Panel [6].

#### *Prevalence of cannabis use: general trends and impact of law reform*

An analysis of the National Drug Strategy (NDS) concluded that while there had been an increase in prevalence of South Australians who had ever tried cannabis (26-38%) since the introduction of the CEN scheme, significant increases were also detected in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales, where cannabis use remained subject to criminal sanctions. Furthermore, rates of recent cannabis use (last 12 months) were not significantly different in SA (16%) than they were in the country as a whole [3,8, also refs in this volume].

#### *Knowledge of cannabis-related laws*

Respondents in SA and the ACT have demonstrated a lower level of knowledge of the laws concerning personal use of cannabis than respondents in other states, with between 27% and 55% incorrectly believing that a number of minor and expiable offences under their drug laws were actually legal [8,9].

#### *Attitudes to cannabis-related laws*

The National Drug Strategy household survey conducted in 1995 found that 50% of those questioned in SA and the ACT felt that the possession of a small quantity of cannabis for personal use should be legal compared to 41% of respondents from the rest of the country [9]. Those who were not in favour of legalization were evenly split between those who felt that it should be a criminal offence and those who favoured some form of civil penalty. South Australians were the most likely to be in favour of such offences attracting non-criminal sanctions. The 1998 National Household survey found that 34% said they 'supported' or 'strongly supported' the personal use of cannabis being made legal [10]. West Australian data suggests that support for decriminalization of cannabis use increases once the type of civil penalties imposed under such a system are described [11].

#### *Personal characteristics associated with attitudes towards the law*

Males, younger people, those who have previously used cannabis or know someone who has, are significantly more likely to support alternatives to prohibition [12, 8]. One study has suggested that women may be more likely to change their opinion in favour of decriminalization once the term was explained [11]. People who vote for conservative parties or who are religious less likely to favour legalization [11]. However, these factors became less influential once decriminalization and the likely penalties under such a system were explained.

#### *Summary*

The prevalence of cannabis use in South Australia does not appear to have been greatly affected by the introduction of the CEN scheme [3,8, also refs in this volume]. Knowledge about the legal status of cannabis in South Australia has been demonstrated to be somewhat lower than in other states that have not changed their cannabis laws with a number wrongly believing that expiable offences were legal [8,9]. South Australians are more likely to favour alternatives to prohibition than Australians in general [9,10]. However, there is not a great deal of research into the knowledge and attitudes of the South Australian public that is specific to the laws that operate in their state.

## Aim

The objectives of the study were (1) to add to the existing knowledge of the prevalence of cannabis use in South Australia and (2) to investigate knowledge and attitudes regarding cannabis laws among South Australian residents.

## Research method

### *Development of the survey instrument*

Four earlier surveys containing questions regarding cannabis use and related attitudes were examined and useful items selected [8,9,13,14]. A questionnaire was devised which included these items and also several original questions. Questionnaire items covered four broad domains; attitudes towards the use of cannabis and other drugs, knowledge of and attitudes towards cannabis-related laws, personal experience with cannabis and other drugs, and demographic data. A more detailed description of the survey development may be found elsewhere [15].

### *Survey procedure and sample selection*

Interviewers from a market research firm telephoned phone numbers generated randomly from all South Australian households and asked to speak to the person whose birthday was closest to the day of the interview. Quotas were developed based on SA 1991 census data for four age groups (14–17, 18–34, 35–54 and 55–70) and place of residence (metropolitan and non metropolitan). Non-metropolitan households were oversampled to obtain large enough cell sizes to allow comparisons employing this variable (404 metropolitan vs. 201 non-metropolitan). Respondents were informed of the nature, purpose and likely length of the survey and an assurance of confidentiality given. Completed surveys took an average of 25 minutes to conduct.

### *Response rate*

A total of 5527 South Australian telephone numbers were selected on a random basis from the Telstra White Pages Database. Of the 675 calls where contact was made and the person was determined to be eligible for interview, 605 fully completed the survey (i.e. 89.6% of those ascertained to be eligible).

### *Statistical analysis*

Gender by age by region comparisons differed in several instances from the expected frequencies derived from the 1996 census data and consequently the data were weighted to control for this. After weighting the sample did not differ from the census figures for age ( $\chi^2 = 2.2642$ ,  $df = 3$ , NS) or gender ( $\chi^2 = 0.0206$ ,  $df = 1$ , NS), but did differ significantly for place of residence, as would be expected given the oversampling of non-metropolitan households ( $\chi^2 = 15.7157$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ ).

The Pearson  $\chi^2$  test was used to examine associations between variables in the study. The Logistic Regression command of SPSS [16] was used to perform backward stepwise logistic regression analyses. For ease of interpretation all predictor variables were dichotomized. The predictor variables considered included age, gender, place of residence (metropolitan/non-metropolitan), religious affiliation, voting at the last state election (right-wing/left-wing), employment status, education, children, having ever used cannabis, knowing someone who uses cannabis, frequency of cannabis use, frequency of alcohol use, intensity of alcohol use and knowing someone who has received a CEN (see Technical Report for greater detail [15]). The logistic regression analyses were performed using unweighted data.

## Results

### *Sample characteristics*

A total of 303 males and 302 females were interviewed. Eleven per cent had a maximum of 2 years secondary school education, 50% had completed between 3 and 6 years of secondary school, 9% had trade qualifications and the remaining 30% had some type of TAFE or university qualification. A total of 59% were in paid full- or part-time work at the time of interview. The remainder were studying, unemployed, retired or engaged in home duties. The vast majority of respondents identified themselves as non-Aboriginal Australians (93%). Just over a third (35%) of the sample indicated that they practised a religion, 90% of whom said their religious beliefs were either 'very important' or 'somewhat important' to them. Respondents were asked who they voted for in the Lower House in the last South Australian state election. Responses on this variable were dichotomized where possible into 'left wing' and 'right wing'. Of the total sample, 29% voted left wing and 34% right wing. A

Table 1. Percentage ever used substance

|              | Yes<br>% | No<br>% | Refuse<br>% | Don't<br>know<br>% |
|--------------|----------|---------|-------------|--------------------|
| Alcohol      | 94.5     | 5.2     | 0.3         | 0.0                |
| Cannabis     | 39.2     | 60.6    | 0.2         | 0.0                |
| Amphetamines | 9.1      | 90.4    | 0.2         | 0.2                |
| LSD          | 8.4      | 91.0    | 0.3         | 0.2                |
| Ecstasy      | 3.4      | 96.5    | 0.2         | 0.0                |
| Cocaine      | 3.1      | 96.7    | 0.2         | 0.0                |
| Heroin       | 2.4      | 97.4    | 0.2         | 0.0                |

*n* = 605.

substantial proportion (21%) reported that they did not vote and 13% could not remember who they voted for.

#### *Drug use and attitudes*

Respondents were asked whether they had ever used alcohol, amphetamines, cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin or LSD. It may be seen from Table 1 that most people had ever used alcohol (95%) and 39% had ever used cannabis. Amphetamines (9%) and LSD (8%) were the next most frequently used while ecstasy, cocaine and heroin had each been used by less than 4%.

While most of those who had ever tried cannabis discontinued use, 15% of the sample continued to use cannabis at least once a year. Respondents were also asked whether they knew anyone (else) who used cannabis. The majority of people responded 'yes' (71%), 27% said 'no' and 2% said they did not know whether they knew anyone who used cannabis.

A third of the sample (34%) believed that cannabis use at least once a fortnight by an adult was 'OK', 65% thought it was 'not OK' and the remainder endorsed 'don't know'.

#### *Knowledge of cannabis-related law*

Respondents were asked whether they had ever heard of the Cannabis Expiation Notice scheme and also whether they had ever heard of the 'on-the-spot fine' scheme. Only 17% had heard of the scheme by its formal name. However, 76% of the sample knew of the scheme by its commonly used name.

Respondents were asked whether each of five cannabis related activities was currently legal or illegal in SA. The activities were 'growing 15 cannabis plants', 'growing three cannabis plants', 'possession of less than 100 g of cannabis for personal use', 'selling 25 g of cannabis for profit' and 'possession of less than 100 g of cannabis by a juvenile (under 18 years)'. All of the activities are illegal under South Australian law. Two of the five offences are expiable: 'growing three plants' and 'possession of less than 100 g for personal use'. Fig. 1 summarizes responses.

Most people knew growing 15 plants, selling cannabis for profit and possession of cannabis by a person under 18 years were illegal activities. However, few people knew that growing three plants and possession of less than 100 g of cannabis is illegal. A small majority believed growing three plants is legal and a quarter thought possession of less than 100 g of cannabis is legal. Many respondents said they did not know whether the activities named were legal or illegal, especially possession of less than 100 g of cannabis.

Many respondents who selected 'legal' may not have understood fully the distinction between legalization and civil penalties, i.e. a person who realized there is some legal repercussion for the activity, may have endorsed 'legal' because they wished to distinguish between expiable- and non-expiable offences. Therefore, respondents were asked what would be the legal consequence of being found engaging in each activity (if any action were taken at all).

Only about two-fifths of the sample knew that the two expiable offences attracted a legal sanction. However, most knew that growing 15 cannabis plants, selling 25 g of cannabis for profit and possession of

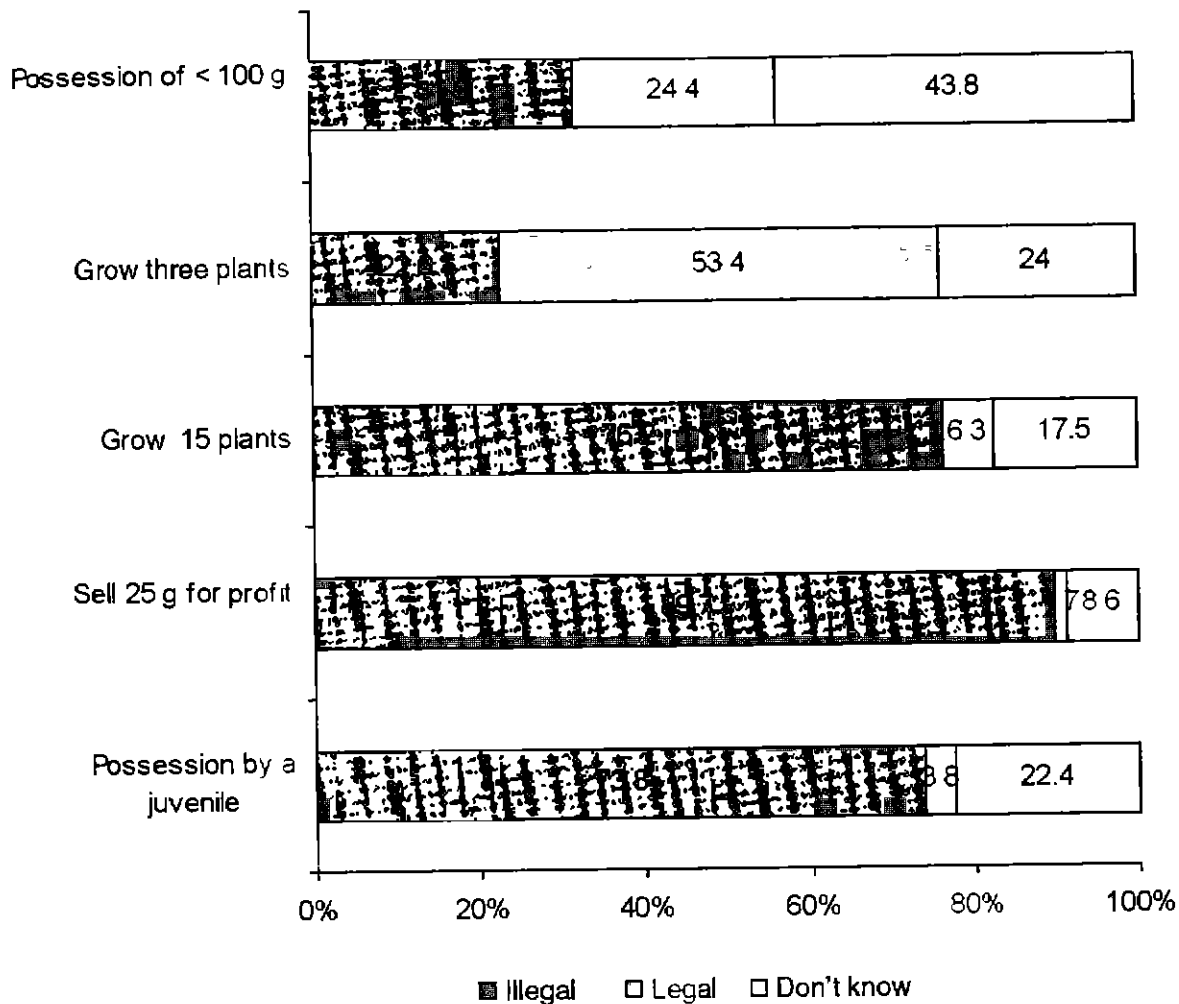


Figure 1. Is cannabis related activity legal or illegal? (n = 605)

cannabis by a juvenile entailed some legal consequence.

Of those participants who knew there is some legal consequence for being found growing three cannabis plants, 87% correctly believed that an 'on-the-spot' fine is given for this offence. Interestingly, 30% of people who incorrectly identified growing three plants as legal *did* actually know that an 'on-the-spot' fine is the typical penalty imposed, as did 13% of the respondents who said they did not know whether the activity was legal or illegal. This suggests that while some people confuse the terms legal and illegal, they may still possess a practical understanding of the consequences if caught.

Of those who knew there is some legal consequence for being detected in possession of less than 100 g of cannabis, 80% correctly endorsed 'on-the-spot' fines. Of those who correctly endorsed possession as illegal, 60% also knew that an 'on-the-spot' fine would be issued. Over a quarter (25%) who mistakenly believed

possession to be legal stated that an 'on-the-spot' fine was the penalty, as did 13% of participants who endorsed 'don't know' if possession is legal or illegal.

#### Attitudes towards cannabis related law

Respondents were asked whether they thought eight cannabis-related activities which were illegal under SA law *should be* legal or illegal. Fig. 2 summarizes responses.

About half of the respondents believed that the two currently expiable offences should be legal (i.e. growing three cannabis plants and for possession of less than 100 g of cannabis). Respondents appeared to distinguish between supplying cannabis with the intent of making a profit and supply with no intention of profiting; only 13% felt that selling 25 g of cannabis should be legal, while 44% believed that giving cannabis to a friend or acquaintance should be legal. The activity for which 'legal' was most readily

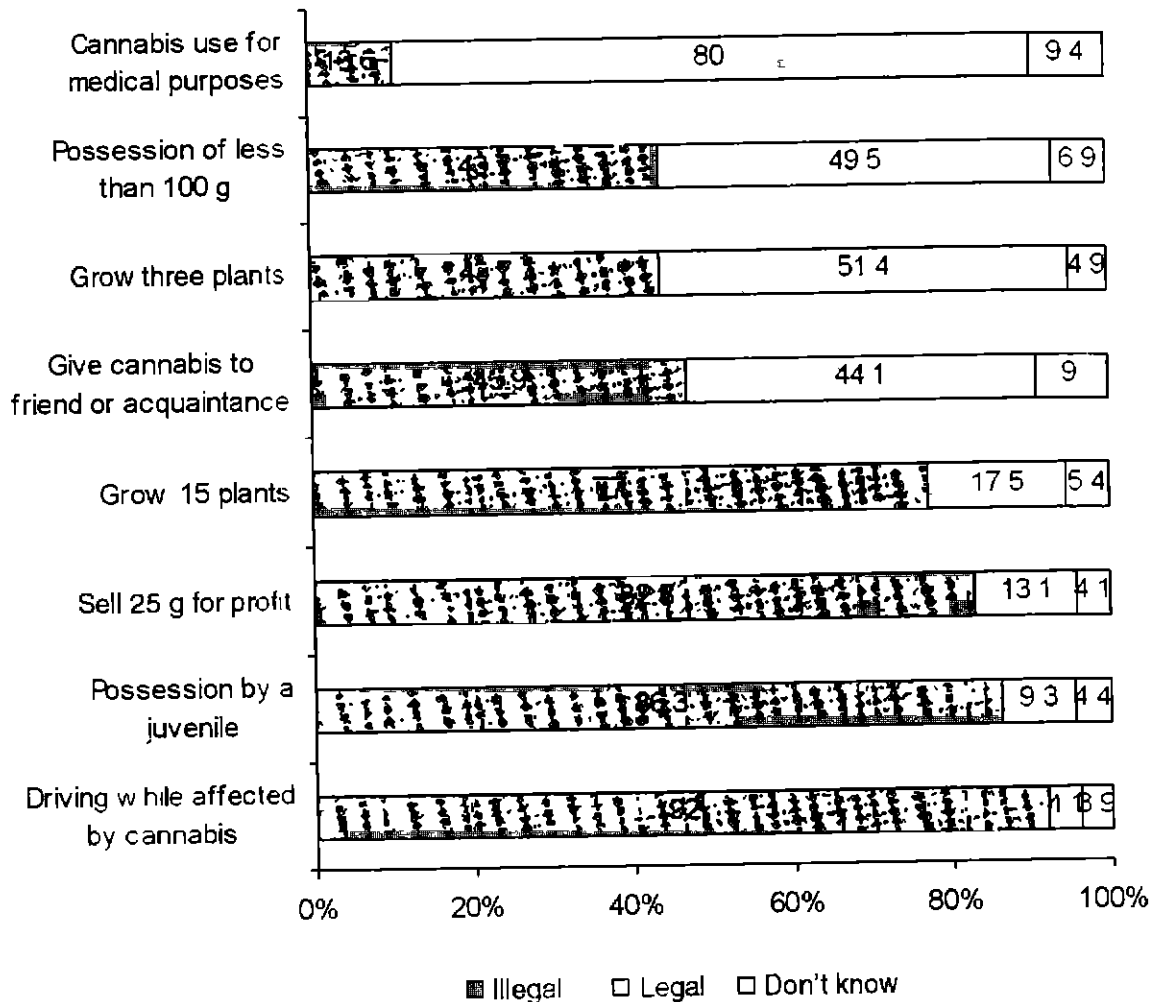


Figure 2. Believe activity should be legal, illegal or don't know (n = 605)

endorsed was 'use for medical purposes', eight out of 10 participants felt this should be legal

In order to determine what factors predict opinion as to whether growing three cannabis plants and possession of less than 100 g of cannabis should be legal or illegal, logistic regression analyses were conducted. Respondents who did not know whether they thought a particular activity should be legal or illegal were omitted from the analysis. Only predictor variables which were found to be significant by bivariate comparison were included in the logistic regression.

Respondents who use cannabis at least once a year were nearly 39 times more likely to be of the opinion that growing three cannabis plants should be a legal activity than other participants. Having ever used cannabis was also a predictor of this attitude, with such people being over three times more likely to endorse 'legal' than others. Religious affiliation was also a relevant predictor, participants who described themselves as having no religion or who said that their

religion is not important to their everyday life were more than twice as likely to favour this activity being legal. Results of the logistic regression are presented in Table 2.

Participants who said they were not religious or who had ever used cannabis were more than twice as likely to be of the opinion that possession of less than 100 g of cannabis should be legal. Participants who used cannabis at least once a year were over 11 times more likely to endorse such a view (Table 3).

Participants who indicated that they felt a particular activity should be illegal or did not know whether they thought it should be legal or illegal were then asked whether they thought it should be a criminal offence. Of these, most thought that growing three cannabis plants, possession of less than 100 g of cannabis, possession of cannabis as a juvenile and use of cannabis for medical purposes should not incur a criminal record. The activities which most people considered should be a criminal offences were driving

**Table 2.** Variables predicting opinion of law concerning growing three cannabis plants

| Value label                      | Log. Reg. coeff. (b) | Wald    | df | Sig. (p) | R      | Odds ratio |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|---------|----|----------|--------|------------|
| No religion/religion unimportant | 0.8565               | 15.9367 | 1  | 0.0001   | 0.1329 | 2.35       |
| Have ever used cannabis          | 1.2166               | 30.1983 | 1  | 0.0000   | 0.1890 | 3.38       |
| Use cannabis at least yearly     | 3.6541               | 12.8674 | 1  | 0.0003   | 0.1173 | 38.63      |
| Constant                         | -4.9522              | 23.9565 | 1  | 0.0000   |        |            |

This analysis included only variables significant on bivariate comparisons. Due to missing data only 571 cases were included in the analysis.

**Table 3.** Variables predicting opinion of law concerning possession of less than 100 g of cannabis

| Value label                      | Log. Reg. coeff. (b) | Wald    | df | Sig. (p) | R      | Odds ratio |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|---------|----|----------|--------|------------|
| No religion/religion unimportant | 0.7004               | 10.7511 | 1  | 0.0010   | 0.1065 | 2.01       |
| Have ever used cannabis          | 0.8401               | 13.6998 | 1  | 0.0002   | 0.1231 | 2.32       |
| Use cannabis at least yearly     | 2.4078               | 19.3807 | 1  | 0.0000   | 0.1501 | 11.11      |
| Constant                         | -3.2955              | 38.9883 | 1  | 0.0000   |        |            |

This analysis included only variables significant on bivariate comparisons. Due to missing data only 557 cases were included in the analysis.

**Table 4.** Should cannabis-related activity be legal non-criminal, criminal or don't know?

|   | Legal –<br>no penalty<br>% | Non-criminal<br>penalty<br>% | Criminal<br>penalty<br>% | Don't<br>know<br>% |
|---|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Cannabis use for medical purposes       | 80                         | 13                           | 3                        | 4                  |
| Grow three plants                       | 51                         | 29                           | 17                       | 3                  |
| Possession of less than 100 g           | 50                         | 28                           | 18                       | 5                  |
| Give cannabis to friend or acquaintance | 44                         | 27                           | 23                       | 5                  |
| Grow 15 plants                          | 18                         | 23                           | 53                       | 7                  |
| Sell 25 g for profit                    | 13                         | 24                           | 59                       | 4                  |
| Possession by a juvenile                | 9                          | 63                           | 22                       | 5                  |
| Driving while affected by cannabis      | 4                          | 24                           | 66                       | 6                  |

n = 605.

**Table 5.** *Appropriate consequence if detected growing three cannabis plants*

|   | Count | % of Responses | % of Cases<br>( <i>n</i> = 294) |
|---|-------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Drug education, treatment or rehabilitation   | 125   | 20.6           | 42.5                            |
| Small fine, up to \$200                       | 95    | 15.7           | 32.4                            |
| Substantial fine, around \$1000               | 86    | 14.2           | 29.3                            |
| Community service work                        | 85    | 14.0           | 28.8                            |
| Caution or warning                            | 73    | 12.0           | 24.8                            |
| Court appearance                              | 71    | 11.6           | 24.0                            |
| Good Behaviour Bond                           | 32    | 5.2            | 10.7                            |
| Jail sentence                                 | 13    | 2.1            | 4.4                             |
| Don't know                                    | 8     | 1.4            | 2.8                             |
| No penalty                                    | 5     | 0.8            | 1.6                             |
| Record conviction/criminal record             | 5     | 0.9            | 1.8                             |
| Increase fine/penalty for subsequent offences | 3     | 0.5            | 1.1                             |
| Public listing of name/public humiliation     | 2     | 0.3            | 0.6                             |
| Confiscation of equipment/substance           | 1     | 0.1            | 0.3                             |
| Other*  | 4     | 0.6            | 1.3                             |
| Total responses                               | 608   | 100.0          | 206.6**                         |

\* Other consequences nominated included 'bring back the stocks', 'slap on the wrist', 'penalty should be the value of the mature plants'; \*\* exceeds 100% as multiple responses permitted.

while affected by cannabis, selling 25 g of cannabis for profit and growing 15 cannabis plants (Table 4).

Respondents who indicated they believed growing three cannabis plants or possession of less than 100 g of cannabis should be illegal were asked to nominate which of a variety of penalties should apply in each case. 'Drug education, rehabilitation or treatment' or a fine were most commonly regarded as an appropriate consequence for growing three cannabis plants. Nearly three out of 10 endorsed community service work. Less than one-quarter believed attending court would be an appropriate consequence. A similar proportion endorsed 'caution or warning'. Jail was supported by only 4% of those who felt growing three cannabis plants should be illegal (Table 5).

'Drug education, treatment or rehabilitation' or a fine were also the most popular consequences for being detected in possession of less than 100 g of cannabis among participants who felt this activity should be illegal. There was also some support for community work or a caution or warning. One in five people favoured a court appearance, although this would not normally occur under the present system. Jail was favoured by only 5% of participants (Table 6).

After hearing the explanation of the expiation system, respondents were asked whether the laws regarding minor cannabis offences should be more lenient than at present, more strict than at present or stay as they are. Forty-three per cent said that the cannabis laws should remain as they currently are, more than one-third (38%) believed the laws should be more strict, while 14% felt they should be more lenient than at present. The remaining 5% of participants endorsed 'don't know'.

Respondents were asked why they believed the South Australian cannabis laws should be more strict, more lenient or stay the same. Those who felt the laws should be more lenient frequently expressed the view that cannabis was not a harmful substance (40%) and that use in private does not have a negative impact on others (27%). Respondents who felt the laws were not strict enough suggested that more severe laws would have a deterrent effect on use (41%) and also that the present system did not provide for sufficiently harsh penalties (33%). Respondents who felt that the current laws were suitable most frequently said that the system allowed an appropriate penalty to be given (32%) and that the CEN was a good system (27%).



**Table 6.** *Appropriate consequence if detected in possession of < 100 grams of cannabis*

|   | Count | % of Responses | % of Cases<br>(n = 306) |
|---|-------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Drug education, treatment or rehabilitation   | 135   | 22.4           | 44.2                    |
| Small fine, up to \$200                       | 89    | 14.8           | 29.2                    |
| Community service work                        | 83    | 13.7           | 27.0                    |
| Substantial fine, around \$1000               | 76    | 12.7           | 25.0                    |
| Caution or warning                            | 67    | 11.2           | 22.0                    |
| Court appearance                              | 67    | 11.1           | 21.9                    |
| Good Behaviour Bond                           | 42    | 7.0            | 13.8                    |
| Jail sentence                                 | 15    | 2.5            | 4.9                     |
| Don't know                                    | 11    | 1.9            | 3.7                     |
| No penalty                                    | 7     | 1.2            | 2.3                     |
| Confiscation of equipment/substance           | 2     | 0.4            | 0.8                     |
| Record conviction/criminal record             | 2     | 0.3            | 0.6                     |
| Increase fine/penalty for subsequent offences | 1     | 0.2            | 0.4                     |
| Depends on circumstances/quantity             | 1     | 0.1            | 0.3                     |
| Public listing of name/public humiliation     | 1     | 0.1            | 0.3                     |
| Other*  | 2     | 0.3            | 0.7                     |
| Total responses                               | 602   | 100.0          | 197.1**                 |

\* Other consequences nominated included 'fine of about \$500', 'slap on the wrist' \*\* exceeds 100% as multiple responses permitted.

## Discussion

It is apparent that there is some confusion amongst the South Australian population concerning the exact nature of the cannabis laws that operate in that state, with many people mistakenly believing offences that are currently illegal but expiable are in fact legal. However, in practical terms, there is a reasonable level of understanding of the consequences of committing a minor cannabis offence. The sample were generally in favour of non-criminal responses to minor cannabis offences of the type that are currently in place in SA. Therefore, there appears to be consistency between legislation and prevailing public opinion.

## Acknowledgements

This study was commissioned by the National Drug Strategy Committee and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. Thanks to Paul Christie and Alisen Brooks from the Drug and Alcohol Services Council South Australia, Matthew Goode from the South Australian Attorney-General's

Department, Detective Superintendent Denis Edmonds from the Drug Task Force South Australian Police, James and Bill, representatives of Help End Marijuana Prohibition South Australia and over 600 telephone respondents who each gave approximately 30 minutes of their time to complete the survey.

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