Trends in Attitudes

Toward Cannabis Legalisation in the United States– a Systematic Review

Vivian Chiu, Wayne Hall, Gary Chan, Leanne Hides and Janni Leung
School of psychology, University of Queensland.
National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research, University of Queensland.

Background and Aims

Americans' attitudes toward cannabis use have changed dramatically, as indicated by the passage of citizen-initiated referenda to legalize its use. The potential influence of policy change on cannabis-related perceptions and attitudes may contribute to changes in cannabis use. In this regard, measures of factors surrounding the approval of cannabis legalization could be intermediate in understanding how cannabis legalization may affect cannabis use.

This paper has two parts.

1. It systematically reviews published evidence on factors associated with the changing support for cannabis legalization since the 1970s.
2. A secondary analysis of US national survey data to assess the temporal trends in the perceived harmfulness and availability of cannabis in the US adult population.

Results

60% US residents support legalization.

The significant shift in attitudes began in the 1990s but population sociodemographic subgroups largely changed their attitudes at a similar rate over time, with a few minor exceptions.

1.Religion:
The increase in non-religious population may have reduced the cannabis-related stigmatization.

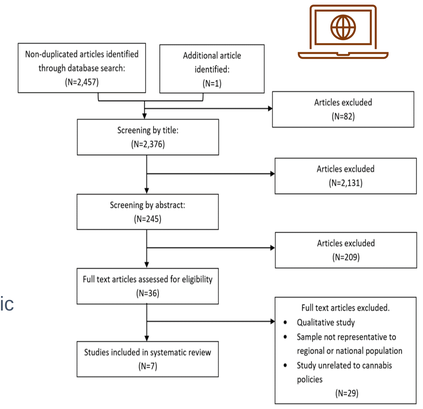
2.Political orientation:
The majority of hardline Republicans remain opposed to legalization while the rest of the US population has become more convinced that cannabis use should be legal.

3.Media framing:
The increasingly positive portrayal of cannabis in news media may have increased public acceptance of cannabis.

Methods

Part I: Systematic Review

- Peer-reviewed published articles in English language were identified through a systematic search of three independent databases in October 2019: PubMed, EMBASE, and PsycINFO.
- Vocabularies related to "cannabis", "policy" and "attitudes" were used to extract relevant articles. The electronic searches included original studies indexed between database inception and 1st October 2019.



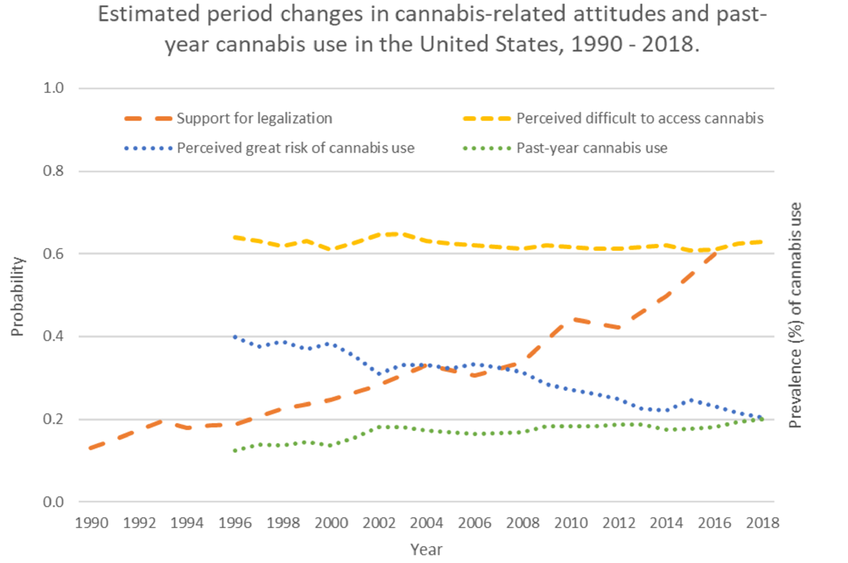
Part II: Analysis of US National Survey on Drug Use and Health

We conducted an independent analysis assessing the temporal changes in perceived harmfulness and availability of cannabis using the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) data between 1996 and 2018, and made ecological comparisons between these perceptions and legalization attitudes.

"How much do people risk harming themselves physically and in other ways when they smoke marijuana once a month?"

"How difficult or easy would it be for you to get some marijuana, if you wanted some?"

Hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) models were used to estimate the role of age, period and birth cohort in cannabis-related perceptions in perceptions that were comparable to those documented in the collected studies.



4. Prevalence of cannabis use:
People who have used cannabis are more supportive of legalization than others, potentially due to lower risk perception and a reflection of self-interest. The increases of adults who use cannabis may have partially contributed to support for legalization.

5. Perceived availability:
The perceived availability of cannabis did not change much over time despite the substantial relaxation in cannabis regulations in recent years in many states.

6. Perceived risk of harm:
A significant reduction in perceiving risk of regular cannabis use from 57% to 37% between 1996 and 2018.

Discussions

There has been a broad-based change in views about cannabis that has increased the acceptance of legalization. The systematic review demonstrated the partial role of the increased non-religious population, decline in political conservatism, positive portrayal of cannabis in media and increased prevalence of cannabis use on the attitudinal shift. Critics have raised concerns that the change in opinions about legalization may reflect views on the perceived harms of using cannabis and increase the risks of adverse health consequences.

The analysis of the NSDUH data confirmed that there has been a significant reduction in perceiving risk of regular cannabis use since the mid-1990s. This observation is consistent with a previous study that found medicalization of cannabis reduced its perceived harmfulness. The increasingly supportive attitudes toward cannabis legalization may be an indicator of cannabis normalization, mediated by reduced perceptions of the risk of using it. However, our results suggest that cannabis legalisation had limited influence on perceived availability despite the substantial relaxation in cannabis regulations in recent years in many states.

Previous studies have found that lower perceived risk of cannabis use is closely tied with increased intention to use cannabis, and our experience in alcohol regulation tells us that improved accessibility would likely increase consumption. The lack of change in perceived availability of cannabis may explain the relatively small increases in adult cannabis use than expected since legalization. As early evidence suggests legalisation have increased cannabis use among adults and cannabis-involved traffic accidents and emergency department visits in the US. Given that recreational marijuana markets are still relatively young, continue monitoring of cannabis-related attitudes, perceptions and consumption is needed to measure the public health effects.

For more information, please contact Vivian Chiu via vivian.chiu@uq.net.au