

# What are the preferred options for cannabis law reform in New Zealand?

## Background

The New Zealand Government recently announced that it intends to conduct a national referendum on cannabis law reform by 2020.<sup>1</sup> The Government is also currently in the process of developing a regulatory regime to improve access to medicinal cannabis. Some business leaders and members of the farming industry have welcomed the prospect of cannabis law reform as a significant new commercial opportunity.<sup>2,3</sup> Some Māori have also called for a legal medicinal cannabis sector as a means to boost regional economic development and employment (e.g. Hikurangi Cannabis Group).<sup>4</sup> However, concerns have been raised about the profit driven legal cannabis regimes established in the U.S., including declining cannabis prices, increasing use of high-potency THC extracts, accidental poisonings from cannabis edibles, use of unregulated pesticides, aggressive marketing of new cannabis products, and cannabis industry influence on regulation-making.<sup>5-10</sup> In Washington State, for example, the retail price of cannabis has declined by 25% each year since legal retail outlets were opened in 2014. Drug policy experts have pointed out a range of reform options available for cannabis, including “not-for-profit” regimes with a focus on returning sales income to the community.<sup>11,12</sup> However, the full range of reform options are rarely presented to the public, and this narrows both the public and political debate, and ultimately the types of regimes which are considered.

## Aim

To collect data on support for a range of policy options for cannabis law reform in New Zealand.

## Method

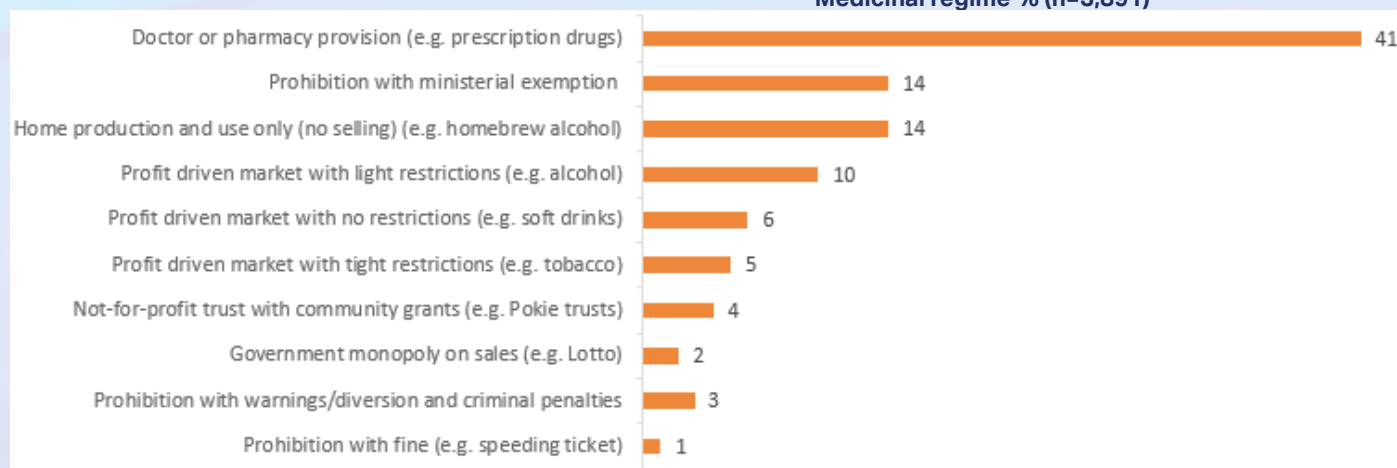
An anonymous online survey (i.e. New Zealand Drug Trends Survey or NZDTS) was promoted via a targeted Facebook™ campaign, from November 2017 to February 2018. Over 6,300 people completed the survey. The survey question began by giving a brief description of the current approach to medicinal and recreational cannabis in New Zealand (at the time of the survey). Respondents were then asked how they would like recreational and medicinal cannabis to be regulated, and were given a list of 10 policy options, including the option to retain the current approach.

## Results

Forty-five percent of the sample were female. The average age of the sample was 29 years, and the age range 16 to 87 years. Twenty-one percent were Māori and 72% European. Sixty-five percent were employed, 18% were students and 11% unemployed or on a sickness benefit. Seventy-three percent of the sample reported using cannabis, 33% ecstasy, 26% LSD, 20% methamphetamine, 11% cocaine and 5% morphine in the previous six months. Over one third of the respondents (36%) answered that they “did not know” or did not provide an answer to the cannabis policy question. For those who indicated a preference for the regulation of medicinal cannabis, 41% supported the use of a “doctor or pharmacy provision”, and this was by far the most popular option (Figure 1). Fourteen percent supported “prohibition with ministerial exemption” (i.e. the current approach at the time of the survey), and a further 14% supported “home production with no selling”. One in ten supported a profit driven medicinal cannabis market with only light restrictions, similar to alcohol. Men, and those who used cannabis in the past six months, were much more likely to support profit driven approaches to medicinal cannabis. Those with higher levels of educational achievement were substantially more likely to support any reform of the current prohibition approach. Support for home production or a government monopoly to supply medicinal cannabis increased with the age of the respondent. Ethnicity, the region the respondent lived in, and the use of other drugs did not predict support for different medicinal cannabis policy approaches.

Figure 1: Respondents' support for different regime options for medicinal cannabis

Medicinal regime % (n=3,891)

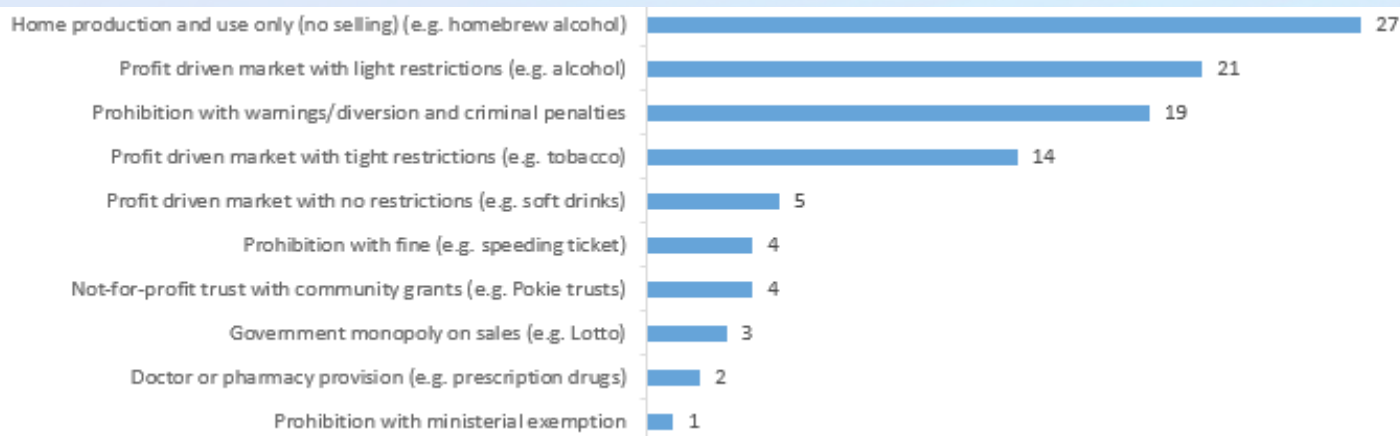


For recreational cannabis use, three quite different approaches received significant levels of support (Figure 2). Twenty-seven percent supported “home production with no selling”, 21% supported a “profit driven market with light regulatory restrictions, like alcohol”, and 19% supported continuing with the current prohibition. A slightly lower proportion supported a profit driven market with tight regulatory controls, similar to the approach taken to tobacco. Māori, and those living in small towns or rural areas, were much less likely to support profit driven approaches to recreational cannabis. In contrast, men were considerably more likely to

support profit driven approaches. Those who used cannabis in the past six months, and those with higher levels of education, were much more likely to support any reform to the current prohibition approach. Support for non-for-profit approaches to recreational cannabis increased with the age of the respondent. The use of drugs other than cannabis did not predict support for different policy approaches to recreational cannabis.

**Figure 2: Respondents' support for different regime options for recreational cannabis**

Recreational regime % (n=4,098)



## Limitations

The NZDTS survey is not a representative sample of the New Zealand population. Rather, the NZDTS engages with a large number of individuals with interest in and knowledge of drug use issues and policy from around the country. Our online sample broadly resembles the demographic profile and regional distribution of the wider New Zealand population, including those who traditionally have lower utilisation of the internet or are less likely to be interviewed in traditional surveys, such as the unemployed, men and those living in geographically isolated smaller communities.

## Conclusions

A national referendum on recreational cannabis use is planned before 2020. It is important that the referendum question presents the full range of reform options available, including the home production, "not-for-profit" and heavily regulated market options, rather than just a binary choice between prohibition and a commercial market. This research bulletin shows that four quite different policy options for the regulation of recreational cannabis in New Zealand attract significant support. The opposition by Māori to profit driven approaches to cannabis may reflect concerns that a commercial market will target Māori youth who already disproportionately suffer from unemployment, lower educational achievement and mental illness. Interestingly, over one third of the survey respondents did not yet have a policy preference for the regulation of cannabis, suggesting that additional information and public debate on different policy options for cannabis law reform is needed. Such debate may well increase support for alternative options that currently do not attract high levels of support.

## Acknowledgements

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