A Public Health Approach to Cannabis Legalization

The Solution Through Distribution

Cannabis legalization is a public health issue

In Nova Scotia approximately (self report):

- 16% of persons over 15 have used cannabis in the past year
- 55% of students in grade 12 have used cannabis in the past year
- 24% of students in grade 12 use cannabis more than once a month

While the health effects of cannabis use are often contested, researchers are clear that use of the drug is harmful to public health. Research has determined that cannabis use:

- Negatively impacts the developing brain
- Causes mental health issues including psychosis
- Hinders professional, social, and educational achievement

How will cannabis retail impact public health?

To protect public health in Nova Scotia as cannabis legalization moves forward, designing a strong distribution and retail format guided by the best available public health evidence will be a key priority.

With primary distribution options ranging from privatized to a publicly owned system, the decision regarding how to distribute cannabis will involve weighing public health protection motivations versus promoting private commercial interests. From a public health perspective, implementing a privatized distribution system would be harmful and would increase the marketization of cannabis, encouraging increased uptake and use of the drug, as private corporations compete for greater market share and profits. As we have learned from alcohol and tobacco retail, enabling a distribution system that promotes the growth of private commercial interests results in weaker health protection policies and poorer public health outcomes.

Researchers and public health professionals are clear: implementing a publicly owned system for cannabis distribution is the best way to protect public health moving forward post-legalization, whereas a privatized system would put public health at risk. In this sense, while prohibition resulted in negative social well-being outcomes, so too would a privatized system.
Theoretical Framework

One regulatory decision will have a direct impact on how all other policy decisions are made. This decision is whether or not to distribute and retail cannabis within a privatized, or publicly owned format.

This policy decision will have an overarching influence on the trajectory and regulatory intent of key policy domains that influence product accessibility, availability, and marketing.

The explanation for this complex decision is simple - by distributing and retailing cannabis within a privatized system, commercial interests are prioritized over public health. For this reason, many leading public health professional agencies and bodies in Canada strongly recommend avoiding the privatization of cannabis, suggesting that policy-makers opt instead for the proven system of a publicly owned system. By choosing a publicly owned format for cannabis distribution and retail, we can put public health first.

Comparison of the differential public health impacts associated with a privatized versus publicly owned distribution system for cannabis, adapted from Caulkins et al. [2015].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Domains</th>
<th>Privatized Distribution and Retail</th>
<th>Publicly Owned Distribution System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Minimum age restrictions, Pricing, Taxation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Retail outlet density, Standalone retail stores, Off-premise retail only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Advertising (physical and digital), Sponsorship, Branding (i.e. packaging and labeling)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population-Level Cannabis Use</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harm to Public Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption and Harm Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


