Criminalization costs and harms

Before cannabis legalization in 2018, advocates fought for justice. They argued that cannabis caused less harm to individuals and society than many other drugs, and that criminalization was unfairly harsh on Black, Indigenous and other marginalized people.

In 2017, Canadian researchers calculated the costs and harms of cannabis and other drugs through the lenses of health care, lost productivity, criminal justice, and other costs.

The study revealed that alcohol and tobacco were by far the most costly and harmful substances in our society. Alcohol represented over 36% of the total costs and harms, while tobacco was almost 27%. These were followed by opioids at 13% and cocaine at 8%.

Cannabis costs and harms were calculated at 7%, or around $3 billion dollars. Half of the costs were related to criminal justice. Since legalization three years ago, we have seen significant changes. For example, the number of youth charged with cannabis possession has dropped by 97%.

But the number of cases that result in charges has gone up. In 2015, 32% of cases resulted in criminal charges, compared to 45% in 2019.

And these days fewer cases are resolved informally. In 2015, almost 60% of cannabis possession cases resulted in withdrawn charges or a warning. In 2019 only one-third of cases had informal resolutions.

What's more, Black and Indigenous people continue to be disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system.

How do possession charge rates for youth compare across the country? British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and Quebec have the highest rates. Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island have the lowest rates.

References:
- CCSA: Impact of Cannabis Legalization on Youth Contact with the Criminal Justice System
- Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms
  This information is accurate as of February 2022.

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Reflect and discuss

- What, if anything, surprised you about the statistics?

- Why is it important that we learn these statistics? What could happen if nobody looked at patterns and changes?

- What are the numbers telling us? What can we learn from them?

- What do you need to know to better understand this issue?

- What other kind of data should we be collecting? Why?