

# Cannabis supply and young people

Findings  
Informing change

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This report provides a snapshot of how young people in a large city and rural villages obtain cannabis. The study interviewed 182 young people aged 11–19, all of whom had used cannabis and/or been involved in cannabis transactions in recent months.

## Key points

- Nearly all the young people reported cannabis to be ‘very easy’ or ‘fairly easy’ to get; 79 per cent stated that they could obtain it in under an hour.
- ‘Chipping in’ and sharing with friends was a common way of buying cannabis for 70 per cent of the sample.
- Social networks were central to the young people’s cannabis transactions. Only 6 per cent had bought from an ‘unknown seller’. Nearly all of those who had bought cannabis described their sellers as ‘very good’ friends, or friends. Nearly a quarter had never bought the drug themselves, relying instead on friends.
- 45 per cent of the sample reported involvement in cannabis transactions. Almost half of these had brokered access, and the rest had sold cannabis.
- Those involved in transactions did not generally perceive themselves as dealers. However, some conceded that they could be seen as such by others.
- Half the young people had taken cannabis into school or college; 43 per cent said they used cannabis while at school or college, but only a minority did so regularly.
- Schools did not appear to be consistent in how they dealt with drug incidents.
- While 33 of the young people had been found in possession of cannabis by the police, none had been caught selling it.
- The researchers conclude that cannabis supply among the young people was social rather than commercial, and not linked to more overtly criminal drug markets. However, cannabis use was embedded in their social world. Change in the drug’s legal status may have little impact. More guidance is needed on dealing with offences of social supply of cannabis.

## The research

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## Background

The social supply of cannabis rarely comes to official attention, and when it does there is already sufficient discretion within the system to respond appropriately. However, there is a strong case for ensuring that clear guidance is available about the best ways of dealing with offences of social supply committed by young people. The findings from this and other studies show that cannabis use is significantly embedded in the social world of many young people. It is unlikely that a marginal change in the drug's legal status will have an impact.

This study interviewed 182 young people aged between 11 and 19, all of whom had used and/or been involved in cannabis transactions in the months prior to the interview.

### Young people's cannabis use

On average, the young people interviewed for this study first tried cannabis at the age of 13. Four-fifths stated that they were introduced to cannabis by friends. The remainder had been introduced to the drug by siblings, other family members, acquaintances or a partner. Only two of the young people said that they had been introduced to cannabis by someone who sold drugs. Nearly two-thirds were regular cannabis users; of these, 34 used it every day, 58 two to three times a week, and 26 once a week. The most common responses given for using cannabis were that it helped them to relax (54 per cent), it helped them to calm down (32 per cent), and that it made them sociable (24 per cent).

The young people were asked how much money they normally spent on cannabis in a week. The average weekly spend among the 143 who answered this question was £20 (median). Almost half funded their use through money from parents or other family members, and nearly a third from their wages. Very few stated that they funded their use through criminal activity such as theft or selling cannabis.

## Getting cannabis

Of those who provided estimates of the time it took to get cannabis (139), 79 per cent said that they could get it in less than an hour, and a further 11 per cent that they could get it on the same day. Nearly all reported cannabis to be 'very easy' or 'fairly easy' to get hold of.

Nearly all the sample obtained cannabis from or through friends, friends of friends or family members. This highlights the importance of friendship and social networks as a supply source for young people within the research sites. Just over half bought directly from a seller they knew personally, as a friend, acquaintance or family member ('known sellers'). Around a quarter did not buy cannabis themselves, but were given it by a friend. A further 16 per cent reported that a friend bought cannabis on their behalf. Only 6 per cent of respondents normally obtained cannabis by purchasing it directly from an 'unknown seller' (that is, they did not know the seller on a personal level and only contacted this person when buying cannabis from them).

The young people were asked for details about the sellers from whom they bought cannabis. The average age of the sellers was reported to be 19 (ranging from age 12 to 45). The young people tended to buy from sellers who were, on average, three years older than themselves. The following quote from one of the interviewees is illustrative of the type of seller from whom many of those in the sample bought cannabis:

**"[They are] not dealers, they make a little bit of money – but not loads, they're helping out friends. If you owe them money they won't chase it up or beat you up."**

Buying with friends ('chipping in') was a common way of purchasing cannabis for many of the young people (70 per cent). Many reasons were given for purchasing cannabis in this manner, but most commonly (37 per cent) respondents referred to the fact that chipping in allowed them to purchase cannabis when they only had small amounts of money. This seemed to be particularly important for those aged between 15 and 17.

## Young people as suppliers of cannabis

Selling was defined as exchanging cannabis for goods or money, and brokering as helping others to access cannabis without making a profit (although some small reward such as a 'bit of weed' might be received for acting as a broker). Just over half of the respondents (55 per cent) reported no involvement in brokering access to or selling cannabis. Of those who had been involved in supplying, almost half had brokered access (37 respondents). The rest (45) reported selling cannabis, nearly half of them on only one or two occasions and the remainder more frequently.

Of those reporting having brokered access to cannabis for others at some time or another, almost half described themselves as brokers at the time of interview. The average age of this group was 16 (range 14 to 18), and the majority lived in rural sites. Nearly all reported that their brokering was an essentially altruistic activity 'to help out friends'.

Those selling cannabis did so at various levels, which can be categorised in the following way:

- *Infrequent sellers* – those who had only ever sold once or twice. This was the largest group (about half of those who had sold cannabis), and for them selling appeared to be opportunistic. However, nearly half of them said that their only motive was to help their friends out.
- *Light sellers* – those who sold small amounts or had sold for only a short period of time (over one-fifth of those selling). Most reported that they sold cannabis to make money. On average, young people from this group were selling to five people. They described the people they sold to as friends.
- *Moderate sellers* – those who had sold amounts between ¼ oz and 2 oz over a period of at least six months (nearly a quarter of those selling). All were regular cannabis users themselves, and all but one was motivated by money. This respondent said that he sold to help out friends. A third of these respondents also said that they sold to afford their own use.
- *Heavy sellers* – those who had sold amounts of over 3 oz for at least eight months. The three respondents in this category all came from London, and all of them had started to sell in order to make money. At the time of interview, none reported that they were still selling.

Respondents involved in selling or brokering of cannabis were asked if they saw themselves as 'drug dealers'. Two of the three heavily involved sellers did so, and half of the moderately involved sellers. Few of the rest did. The majority clearly distanced themselves from the label of drug dealer. They saw a drug dealer as someone who sold a considerable quantity of cannabis to a sizeable customer base, making a significant profit.

## School and police responses to young people's cannabis use

Half of the young people had taken cannabis into school or college and 43 per cent said that they had used cannabis while at school or college, but only a minority of respondents did this on a regular basis. This appeared to be reflected in the small number of young people who reported having been caught under the influence of, in possession of, or selling or brokering cannabis. There appeared to be no real consistency in how schools dealt with drug incidents, and nearly all the young people who had been caught reported that the incident had not impacted on them.

While 33 of the young people had been found in possession of cannabis by the police, none had been caught selling the drug. Most of the young people were aware that they would be arrested if they were caught selling cannabis, and over three-quarters knew that there was no difference in sanctions between social and commercial supply.

## Conclusion

Cannabis supply to young people, at least in the areas where the research was conducted, had little to do with commercial concerns or financial gain. Young people were introduced to cannabis by friends, accessed and maintained supplies via friends, and passed on and sold cannabis to friends. Importantly, these cannabis supply mechanisms served to insulate or distance young people from more overtly criminal drug markets, although it cannot be assumed that this situation is replicated throughout Britain.

The researchers conclude that the key policy implications are as follows:

- The Association of Chief Police Officers, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Youth Justice Board and the Department for Education and Skills need to develop guidance on the best ways of dealing with offences of social supply committed by young people.
- It is doubtful whether the re-classification of cannabis to class B will have any impact on young people's using patterns or methods of gaining access to the drug. It is important, however, to have consistent, visible provision of accurate and accessible information about the health risks that cannabis use actually represents to young people.

## About the project

The 182 young people interviewed for this study were aged between 11 and 19; some were city dwellers, others lived in rural villages. To participate in the research, young people had to fit one of two criteria: that they had used cannabis on at least one occasion in the three months prior to interview, and /or had brokered access to or sold cannabis within the six months prior to interview. This group was therefore unlikely to be representative of young people in general. The interviews were carried out during 2006 and 2007.

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## For further information

The full report, **Cannabis supply and young people: "It's a social thing"** by Martin Duffy, Nadine Schafer, Ross Coomber, Lauren O'Connell and Paul J Turnbull, is published in January 2008 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Drug and Alcohol series.

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