

THE EXTENT OF ILLICIT CANNABIS USE IN THE UK TO SELF-TREAT CHRONIC HEALTH CONDITIONS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

Lucy Troup¹, Simon Erridge^{2,3}, Mikael H Sodergren^{2,3}

1. School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, UK
2. Sapphire Medical Clinics, London, UK
3. Medical Cannabis Research Group, Imperial College London, UK

Introduction: In 2019, a large-scale cross-sectional survey conducted by The Centre for Medicinal Cannabis estimated that approximately 1.4 million adults in the UK purchase illicit cannabis in an attempt to self-treat chronic physical and mental health conditions. This survey was conducted one year following the rescheduling of cannabis-based medicinal products (CBMPs) in the United Kingdom, but before the first specialist clinics had started treating patients. It is estimated that approximately 32,000 individuals are now prescribed unlicensed CBMPs. The aim of this study was to therefore assess changes to illicit cannabis consumption following increased access to CBMPs.

Methods: Adults over the age of 18 in the UK were invited to participate in a cross-sectional survey through YouGov® between 22nd and 29th September 2022. The responding sample was weighted to generate a sample representative of the adult population of the UK. A series of questions were asked about respondents' medical diagnoses, illicit cannabis use, cost of purchasing illicit cannabis per month, and basic demographics. Modelling of population size was conducted based on an adult (≥ 18 years) population of 53,369,083 according to 2021 national census data.

Results: There were 10,965 respondents to the questionnaire, of which 5,173 (47.2%) and 5,792 (52.8%) were male and female respectively. 5,670 (51.7%) respondents indicated that they were affected by a chronic health condition. The most common reported conditions were anxiety disorders ($n = 1,588$; 14%). Of those suffering with health condition, 364 (6.4%) purchased illicit cannabis to self-treat health conditions. Utilising this proportional response of a weighted population sample, 1,781,673 individuals were modelled to consume illicit cannabis for health conditions across the United Kingdom. Of these, 333 (91.5%) reported the financial costs of their illicit cannabis, with 226 (67.9%) spending less than £200 per month and 107 (32.1%) spending more than £200 per month. A total of 88 (24.2%) were unaware that CBMPs were legally available for eligible patients in the United Kingdom.

Discussion: There was a modelled rise in the number of individuals utilising illicit cannabis to self-treat chronic health conditions in the United Kingdom in 2022 compared to previously reported figures in 2019, despite the advent of specialist clinics in the intervening period. There was an increase in both the number of individuals who reported a health condition, as well as the proportion of those with health conditions self-treating with illicit cannabis. One possible explanation for both the increase could be related to the impact coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has had on both physical and mental health as well as access to treatment. Public health measures taken during COVID-19, whilst necessary, had a demonstrable impact on mental and physical health and the ability to access healthcare. This is a potential cause the increase seen in patients seeking alternative approaches to treatment. In addition to this, the cause is likely multifactorial, with an increase in acceptability and a reduction in stigma towards cannabis as a medicine.