

# **The cannabis issue in The Netherlands**

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Drug use could be defined as  
in a certain culture not  
tolerated use of a substance to  
reach a better state of wellbeing  
not prescribed as a medicine

## Effects of cannabis use as seen in 1972

Immediate physical effects after ½ hr of use:

red conjunctiva of the eyes, increased pulse rate, dry mouth,  
lower blood sugar, dizziness

hypersensitivity for sounds and colours, heavy feeling in limbs  
(feeling “stoned” )

thinking becomes associative, less critical to oneself, laughing

Panic reactions, hallucinations, paranoia and psychotic reactions  
can occur, easily stopped with tranquillizers or sugar

A pre-existing tendency to develop a mental disease can be  
triggered (schizophrenia)

There is no relation with criminal behaviour

Long term effects were not clear

Addiction is seen as a psychological dependence

## General ideas in The Netherlands in the Seventies

Use of cannabis is less harmful than  
the use of heroin or alcohol or smoking

Use of cannabis does not lead to addiction

Users are not a nuisance to others

Why should it not be allowed to use cannabis ?

A person should be free to choose

**hard drugs**

soft drugs

Hard drugs are drugs causing changes in the body in such a way that stopping of the use results in serious functional disturbances urging the user to continue the use to avoid these to occur

Cannabis was regarded as a drug not having these potential consequences and therefore called a soft drug

The risks of the use were seen as acceptable

## Dutch policies on cannabis in 1976

Use of cannabis is no longer a crime

Possession of 5 gram of marihuana (wiet) is allowed  
for personal use

An individual could grow 5 plants for personal use.

The policy could avoid the shift of the user  
from soft to hard drugs (stepping stone)

The police can concentrate its efforts on hard drugs

## Coffee shops

The first coffee shop was established in 1980 in Amsterdam

In 2010 there were in the Netherlands 650 coffee shops (of which 214 in Amsterdam)

87% of the users obtain the cannabis from coffee shops

The pay taxes (around 34.000 Euro a year

Since 2010 several coffee shops have been closed. Most of them because they were situated near schools, some were selling hard drugs. Also coffee shops near the border with Belgium (Terneuzen, Bergen op Zoom and Roosendaal) were closed

## Unintended effects of the cannabis policies

Criminal organisations took over the coffee shops  
fighting each other

Enormous increase of cannabis nurseries usually in  
empty buildings

Illegal electricity obtaining and fires from nurseries

An estimated 80% of the cannabis collected is exported  
to other countries in Europe (no border control)

The profits of the export of cannabis (Nederwiet) is estimated  
to be around 3.000.000.000,- Euro per year

The Netherlands became the world's largest exporter of  
cannabis seeds

## Drug tourism

The majority of the clients of most coffee shops are foreigners ( in the border cities more than 80%)

In 2008 23 % of all foreign visitors to Amsterdam bought cannabis in coffee shops .

In 2011 this percentage had increased to 35 %

## Courts decision 2012

Owners of coffee shops will not be prosecuted for having more than 500 gram of marihuana in their stores

For commercial exploitation of the coffee shop which is allowed by the local and national government more than 500 g in stock is necessary

The selling in the coffee shop was allowed by the local authorities in order to stop the selling in the streets

# Percentages of self reported use of cannabis in Europe in 2011

|               | ever used | last month     |
|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| 15 -65 years: | 23.2%     | 3.6%           |
| 15-34 years:  | 32%       | 6.6%           |
| 15-24 years:  | 30 %      | 8%             |
| Greece        | 9 %       | Greece 1.2%    |
| Czech Rep     | 53.8%     | Czech R. 11.6% |
| Spain         | 39.1%     | Spain 17.2%    |
| Denmark       | 38 %      | Sweden 2.2%    |

From: EMCDDA, 2011

# Percentages of self reported use among youth ( 12 -18 years) and ever used (between brackets) in The Netherlands

|          |      | 1992 |      | 1996 |      | 2003 |      | 2011 |      |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| alcohol  | m    | 48   |      | 60   |      | 60   |      | 44   |      |
|          | f    | 44   |      | 51   |      | 57   |      | 43   |      |
| cannabis | m    | 9    | (20) | 14   | (26) | 9    | (20) | 11   | (22) |
|          | f    | 4    | (12) | 8    | (18) | 7    | (16) | 5    | (16) |
| smoking  | m+ f | 28   |      | 28   |      | 24   |      | 18   |      |

From: Trimbos Inst. 2013

# Changes in cannabis use in this century in The Netherlands

- No expectations among the users of a new awareness as in the hippy period
- Solitary use instead of use in groups
- The goal is to escape from tensions and problems and to relax and sleep
- The THC has increased to more than 15 %  
The THC content is increased in nurseries by stronger light and using skunk (unfertilized floral parts of the female plant) as a more potent variant of cannabis

## Increased number of cannabis users seek treatment

In Europe cannabis is now the second most reported primary drug after heroin for people entering treatment

The number of primary cannabis users seeking treatment has increased by 40 % between 2004 and 2009 and is now stabilizing

The average age of cannabis users entering treatment is 25 yrs the youngest client group entering drug treatment

In The Hague 50% of the patients of the detox unit for adolescents are now solely addicted to cannabis

## Medical use of cannabis in The Netherlands

Cannabis can be prescribed in the Netherlands by doctors for relieving pain in cancer, for multiple sclerosis etc.

Patients usually prefer the cannabis from coffee shops  
(better quality, cheaper)

Prescribed cannabis is not diverted to people for recreational use

## Dutch government plans 2012

- Weet pass for coffee shop clients
- Coffee shops have to become closed clubs with a maximum of 2000 members
- No sale to foreigners
- No coffee shops within 350 meters from schools
- THC content not higher than 15 %

## Results of the introduction the wiet pass in southern provinces

75% of the clients refused to be registered

Protests from mayors of large cities

Amsterdam was clear: it would refuse to introduce the  
wiet pass

More selling in the streets

Finally it was decided by the government that each city  
could decide its own policy on coffee shops

## Police activities in The Netherlands in 2013

- 5.962 cannabis nurseries destroyed
- Only professional growers with lamps and ventilators were arrested.
- The others got a fine and their plants were destroyed

## New known effects of cannabis use in 2014

Use at early age: 2 x likely to develop a psychotic disorder

Heavy use at age 18: increases the risk of developing schizophrenia later 6 x

Long term study found a decline in I.Q. of 6 points in adolescents who used cannabis regularly compared with non users

A NIDA funded study found changes in areas of the brain of marijuana users (nucleus accumbens, and amygdala), areas regulating emotion and motivation has been reported recently

(North Western's University, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School)

# New Plans

- Mayors from different cities Utrecht, Heerlen, Eindhoven wrote plans to have nurseries owned by the cities for selected coffee shops
- Wiet clubs (cooperatives) growing cannabis of owners of 5 plants
- Copy the legalisation in Uruguay ( max. 40 gram per household per month, 6 plants per household, registration of the users, marihuana clubs with maximum of 99 plants; the marihuana is sold at pharmacies, commercial nurseries can have contracts to deliver to the state)
- Home delivery after ordering coupons through internet by businesses who use the coupons to get the cannabis from the coffee shops ( coffee shops are not allowed to deliver at home)

The opposition is in favour of these plans, the government is against.

# Cannabis dependence study on coffee shop clients

Four and half year follow-up (interviews at 1 ½ year intervals)

Sample: 600 clients of different coffee shops in 5 cities  
who used cannabis more than three times/ week  
who were at the start not addicted

Average age: 22  
70 % male

At the final interview 40 % were addicted  
(not able to stop when they tried, using more than planned)

Those who had become addicted had more personal problems and  
were more using alone

More frequent use or stronger THC was not related to becoming addicted

(P. Van der Pol Trimbos Inst. 2014)

Apparently for becoming addicted there is something else necessary than the use of the drug

As is said in a old Moroccan saying:

You are a kif addict before  
you smoked your first pipe

## Conclusions 1

Allowing coffee shops to sell cannabis at the front door without any legal regulation to buy cannabis at the back door led to an easy way of selling illegally grown cannabis

It created the possibility for criminal organisation to take over the market

The attempt to divide the markets of soft and hard drugs by allowing coffee shops to sell cannabis did not result in a lower consumption of hard drugs

Through the system of the coffee shops cannabis could be exported to other countries (now around 80 %).

The coffee shop experiment has become a juridical and social disaster

## Conclusions 2

Cannabis is not the same drug as in the Seventies. The average THC percentage has increased to more than 15 %

The use in has changed from recreational use to enjoy the effects to solitary use to relax, forget problems and escape from stress

Cannabis use can lead to addiction

The damage to the brain in chronic use is worse compared with chronic use of heroin

Long term use leads in adolescence to neurophysiological dysfunction, decline in the I.Q., short memory, coordination and motivation problems

## Conclusions 3

Cannabis can no longer be regarded as a soft drug

There is no longer any justification to have different laws for cannabis as for other (hard) drugs

Legalization in reinforces the already existing opinion among youth that there are no risks in using cannabis

Thank you for your attention