

### **DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF CANNABIS: THE PROBLEM AND POTENTIAL COUNTERMEASURES.**

#### **Crime and Justice Bulletin No. 87**

**Jones, Donnelly, Swift & Weatherburn, (2005).**

NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

#### **Aims and Methodology**

The researchers examined the behaviour of cannabis users who were also drivers. It focussed on: whether recent drug-affected drivers were more likely to self-report accidents than were non-drug affected drivers; the likely deterrent effects of roadside drug testing (RDT); increasing the severity of penalties for drug-driving and providing factual information about accident risk and drug driving; and, the factors that were predictive of driving under the influence of cannabis (DUIC). The researchers conducted 320 face-to-face interviews with NSW cannabis users, 120 of which were from Newcastle and 200 from Sydney. All participants were asked to respond to a scenario with certain aspects changed. These aspects related to the perceived certainty of being caught for DUIC and the severity of penalties when caught.

#### **Key findings:**

- Seventy eight percent of the sample had driven at least once within an hour<sup>1</sup> of using cannabis by itself in the past 12 months and 27% had done so weekly or more frequently.
- Nearly one third of the group reported driving within an hour of using cannabis in combination with alcohol, with almost 2% reporting having done so on a weekly basis. A further third reported driving after they had recently used cannabis in conjunction with other drugs, with or without alcohol. Among this group 15% had driven after using cannabis in combination with each of ecstasy and amphetamines, 2% after using cannabis with hallucinogens, 1% with benzodiazepines, 4% with heroin, 3% with cocaine, and 1% with each of methadone and gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB).
- The researchers found only limited evidence that recent cannabis use increases accident risk. This finding was probably a result of statistical issues with the research and runs counter to their findings that: more than a quarter of those who had driven under the influence of cannabis felt that their driving was impaired on the last occasion that they drove within an hour of using the drug; and that a small, but not insignificant, proportion of participants reported having a crash within a short time of using cannabis.
- There was little evidence to suggest that DUIC would be discouraged through the imposition of tougher penalties. This was particularly the case in the context of the relatively low perceived risk of being apprehended for this offence.

<sup>1</sup> The time frame of one hour was chosen because there is significant evidence that impairment due to cannabis use is known to be the most severe within this time frame. Since impairment can last for longer than one hour, this research is likely to provide a very conservative indication of the incidence of drug-driving among this population.

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- The findings provide strong support for measures that increase the perceived risk of apprehension (e.g. roadside saliva testing). This deterrent value is dependent on the extent to which the proposed testing methods have a sufficient degree of sensitivity (the proportion of drivers who have used drugs who are correctly identified as positive by the test) and negative predictive value (the proportion of drivers with negative tests who have not actually used drugs).
- The findings in relation to the potential effectiveness of educational approaches to drug driving were less encouraging, although this option ought not to be dismissed totally.
- Weekly cannabis users, dependent cannabis users, earlier onset cannabis users and individuals who had used more classes of drug in their lifetime were more likely to have DUIC in the previous year. Participants who had had their license revoked at least once, participants who had at least one driving conviction and more frequent drivers were also more likely to report DUIC in the previous year.
- The findings of this research cannot be assumed to be representative of the DUIC behaviour of all cannabis users, because of the methods that the researchers used to recruit their subjects. Nevertheless, it is worth noting their findings are consistent with other research into DUIC.

### **Implications for policing**

While educational strategies, or increasing the sanctions for DUIC, ought not to be ruled out it appears that approaches which enhance the potential offenders' perceptions of the likelihood of being caught, are likely to be the most effective in reducing the extent of DUIC. These approaches include roadside drug-screening and Standardised Field Sobriety Testing.

The finding that cannabis dependence is a strong risk factor for DUIC, should also be brought to the attention of those providing drug treatment services. If dependent cannabis users do seek treatment for their problems then it is important that treatment providers avail themselves of the opportunity to impact upon what could well be the major acute risk posed by the use of cannabis, namely road trauma.

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