

AUSTRALIAN POLICE DIVERSION FOR CANNABIS OFFENCES: OUTCOMES AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

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Introduction and Aims: Police diversion is one of Australia's most utilised interventions for minor cannabis offences. Knowledge gaps remain about its efficacy. This study aimed to evaluate the outcomes and cost-effectiveness of three forms of police diversion for cannabis (caution, expiation and warning) relative to a traditional criminal justice system response (charge).

Design and Methods: A purpose built on-line survey was administered to a national sample of individuals who had a recent police encounter for cannabis use/possession. Outcome measures included reported changes in cannabis use, recidivism, as well as employment, perceived legitimacy of police, health status and costs.

Results: A sample of 998 respondents was attained (charge N=195; caution N=614; expiation N=69; warnings N=120). 50% of each group consumed cannabis at least daily pre-intervention. From pre to post-intervention those diverted showed reductions in drug use and offending and fewer problems in social domains. But compared to the charge group the only statistically significant difference was in social domains. The economic costs of the charge group were higher compared to all diversion groups.

Discussion and Conclusions: The results suggest cannabis diversion offers benefits, but that the largest benefit may be in fewer the adverse social consequences of a criminal record and saving police time and money.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These results provide added evidence for the continuation of diversion. But it raises the question whether therapeutic benefits could be enhanced; through more intensive therapeutic responses. To test these additional analyses will be presented comparing charge, and low and medium intensity cannabis cautions.

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