

AGE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEVELS OF CANNABIS USE AND BELIEFS ABOUT CANNABIS USE IN AUSTRALIA FROM 2004 TO 2013

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Background and aims: The prevalence of cannabis use among Australians has declined over the past decade. However, population level research concerning associated changes in cannabis related beliefs and attitudes is scarce. To address this, a study was conducted that examined changes in cannabis use and related beliefs and attitudes among Australians from 2004 to 2013.

Method: Secondary analyses of 2004 and 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey data (N=53,300).

Results: Population level prevalence of past 12 month cannabis use declined significantly ($p<.001$) from 11.3% in 2004 to 10.2% in 2013. The exception was for those age 50+ years where prevalence rose significantly ($p<.001$) from 1.5% to 3.6%. Across all age and gender groups, the proportion of Australians who approved of cannabis use declined significantly ($p<.001$). Proportions who believed cannabis was a 'drug problem', or believed cannabis was the drug of most concern also declined significantly ($p<.001$). There were no significant overall population level changes in support for increased penalties for use, or in opposition to the legalisation of personal use. However, among those aged 50+ years, support for increased penalties declined significantly ($p<.005$) among males and opposition to legalisation significantly declined among both males and females ($p<.001$ and $p<.005$, respectively).

Conclusions: While cannabis use is declining among Australians, those aged 50+ years are a growing risk group. Population level declines in use appear not to be associated with increase perceptions of cannabis being a 'problem' or a community concern. Rather declines in use appear associated with a decline in the acceptability (approval) of use.

Implications for policy or practice: These findings highlight a need for intervention and harm reduction strategies that target older Australians, and indicate that strategies which aim at reduce the social acceptability of cannabis use may be effective prevention strategies.

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