SOCIAL RESEARCH REPORTS

ISSN: 2066-6861 (print), ISSN: 2067-5941 (electronic)

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Social Research Reports, 2018, Vol. 10, Issue 2, pp. 95-100

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PERCEPTIONS OF INVOLVED PROFESSIONALS REGARDING CANNABIS DECRIMINALIZATION

Remus NICA[1], Danut S. BALAUTA[2], Florina Luiza VLAICU[3], Dolores Denisa DONGEA[4]

Abstract

Recent discussions about drugs frequently include the debate on the decriminalization of cannabis, as the variety of models practiced today makes it difficult to assess the impact of decriminalization on values such as drug premeditation, problem drug use, drug-related or consumer-related deaths, and the cost of criminal punishment. This pilot study aims to analyze the perception of the use of cannabis and legislative measures regarding consumption. The group of participants consists of professionals from diverse fields of activity (physical and mental health, social work, teology). The results of the research showed that the majority of the professionals included in this study disagree with cannabis decriminalization, considering that current restrictions should remain in place, maybe with the reduction of existing sanctions.

Keywords: drugs, cannabis, decriminalization, professionals.

Introduction

According to the most recent studies done in Romania (2015), both in the school population and in the general population, cannabis is the most consumed drug - 4.6% of the general population aged 15-64 reported in a survey that they had experienced cannabis, of which 2% last year, and 1% in the last month. Cannabis use is more prevalent among men, regardless of the time period analyzed. For the first time throughout the monitoring period, cannabis is in the first place for treatment demand due to drug use. Also, it is the most captured drug in 2015, with cannabis seizures accounting for 44.3% of the total amount of drug

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captures. For the year 2015, for all reference periods, there are higher values of prevalence of cannabis use among boys compared to girls, thus, the prevalence of cannabis use by the age of 16 was 10.3% for boys, versus 6.1% among girls; the prevalence of cannabis use in the last year was 7.8% among boys, and 4.5% among girls; the use of cannabis in the last 30 days has a prevalence among the boys in Romania of 4%, and 1.9% among girls. (National Antidrug Agency, 2016).

Holm *et al.* (2014) also state that the most commonly used illicit drug worldwide is cannabis, as there is a culture for it. The use or abuse of substances may be enhanced by several factors: a difficult economic situation, school difficulties, domestic violence, mental health problems, a consumer or an addict in the family, being part of vulnerable groups, etc. (Barbat, 2010). These results prompt us to reflect on the necessity and importance of adopting effective policies on drug-related activities.

Some countries have reduced tough penalties for drug-related offenses to lower costs, others have tightened public health measures to limit the destructive impact of drug use. However, the increase in the cost of self-financing and the many examples of failures associated with legal punishments for drug-related activities - stigmatization, unemployment, public health threats - pushed a number of states to adopt an alternative policy: decriminalizing possession and drug use (Rosmarin & Eastwood, 2012). Gowing *et al.* (1998) recall that the health benefits of cannabis have been discussed since antiquity. Over the years, cannabis has been said to increase appetite, relax muscles, improve mood, combat pain and nausea. With the emergence of standardized drugs, medical use of cannabis has become obscure, but since the age of 60, when cannabis use has become a recreational drug, interest in possible therapeutic effects has been rekindled. In the public debate, decriminalization of social use of cannabis has begun.

Decriminalization has not centered on a continent, rich or poor - countries such as Armenia, Belgium, Chile, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Mexico or Portugal, have adopted various policies of decriminalization over the last decade. The variety of decriminalization models practiced today makes it difficult to assess the impact of decriminalization on values such as drug premeditation, problem drug use, drug-related or consumer-related deaths, and the cost of criminal punishment. Each policy variable can have a significant impact on the measurable results of a policy change in the area of decriminalization (threshold quantities, administrative punishment, etc).

It is necessary to understand what decriminalization implies - no criminal sanctions to certain categories of offenses. In support for this, the Dutch model is a system where tolerance has allowed reducing of drug-related crime. The Netherlands, being regarded as a global pioneer in drugs have a long-standing policy of non-prosecution. Recent drug policy reviews in the Netherlands show a low number of deaths from heroin and methadone, compared to the rest of the world and a drop in the number of young people who become offenders, demonstrating that policies of decriminalization contributed to the reduction of harmful effects of drugs. (Rosmarin, Eastwood, 2012).

Usually, drug users are stigmatized, both by others and by the professionals that work with them. The social worker is among the specialists involved in helping users/addicts, and in the evolution of forms of rehabilitation and social reintegration. The social worker (and other professionals working with addicts) needs to avoid enhacing the stigma and marginalization of the person, by not using a language loaded with inconsistent semantics. (Goian, 2010). Also, in dialogue with beneficiaries, in this case, drug users/addicts, social workers may face cultural issues which charge linguistic differences designed to affect the professional relationship. (Goian, Vintila, Bucur, 2012)

Methodology

This pilot study aims to explore the perception regarding the use of cannabis and also the issue of cannabis decriminalization, from the point of view of a multidisciplinary group of professionals, from diverse fields of activity - physical and mental health, social work, teology. The research was conducted in Timisoara, in 2017, using *individual interviews* for gathering data. The results limit of the study is that we cannot generalize the answers for the entire population of professionals from these fields of activity, as the number of respondents was limited.

The research *instrument* ws developed by the authors and has 10 questions, along with 3 demografical items (gender, age, profession). Exemple of items are: “Do you think that the possession of small quantities of cannabis has to be considered an offense?”; “What measures do you think should be taken against cannabis users?”; “Do you think that decriminalization of cannabis in Romania could lead to increased consumption of high-risk drugs (heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, etc.)?”. Participants in this study were assured of respecting the confidentiality regarding their identity and their responses, by respecting the ethics of research in social sciences.

Description of Research Participants

The motivation for chosing medical staff, social workers, priests and psychologists is because these professionals may be directly involved in assisting drug users/addicts by working in specialized services or in a multidisciplinary team. This study takes into account a group of 60 respondents (20 male and 40 female, with mean of age 39 years old). From the total of respondents 66,66% are social workers (6 male and 14 female), 16,66% are psychologists (2 male and 8 female); 36,66% are medical staff (4 male and 18 female) and 13,33% are priests (8 male). Also, from the total of respondents, 73,33% ar smokers and just 10% do not consume alcohol.

Results

As a result of the frequency analysis, we can say that although the opinion of the respondents about the use of cannabis oscillates between keeping it illegal (with or without the imposition of sanctions) and being considered legal, regardless of whether professionals worked with drug users, they have similar views on the use of cannabis. The average of answers indicates the option to remain illegal, with the reduction of existent sanctions (mean = 1.97, SD = .999).

Regarding the perception of the respondents about a possible influence of cannabis decriminalization on criminality in Romania, 56.67% of the respondents are confident that there will be no influence after such a measure, while 23.33% consider that following the decriminalization of cannabis, crime will rise, and 20% say that crime will drop as a result of such a measure.

A Persons's *r* data analysis revealed a moderate correlation, *r* = .43. The respondents that don't consider that the possession of small quantities of cannabis has to be considered an offense reported that in case of decriminalization, there will be no influence in increasing the criminality rate. Almost half of the respondents (46,67%) think that with decriminalization of cannabis in Romania, the consumption of high-risk drugs (heroin, cocaine, amphetamines etc.) will decrease, 26.67% of the respondents think that there will be no influence and 26.67% think that decriminalization could lead to increased consumption of high-risk drugs.

Most of the respondents firstly consider the drug user as a victim (43,33% - most of the responders are social workers and psychologists) and part of the medical staff regard the drug user as a sick person (20%). All the priests consider that the drug consumer is a low-willed person. Asking about the measures that they think should be taken against cannabis users, we conclude that social workers, psychologists and priests tend to be more permissive than medical staff (see tabel below).

Table 1. Distribution of responsens regarding profession and measures taken against cannabis users

		What measures do yo think should be taken against cannabis users?				Total
		notice	community service	contraventional sanction	criminal fine	
Profession:	social workers	8	6	4	2	20
	pshychologists	4	4	2	0	10
	medical staff	2	8	8	4	22
	priests	0	6	2	0	8
Total		14	24	16	6	60

Source: Table generated by authors.

A Persons's *r* data analysis revealed a strong correlation, *r* = .78. The respondents considering that cannabis should be legal also think that the possession of small quantities of cannabis should not be considered an offense.

23,33% of the respondents tried cannabis before (some used it ocasionally, some used to consume frequently) and all of them think that cannabis should be legal.

Conclusions

The majority of the professionals from this study tend to disagree with cannabis decriminalization, considering that current restrictions should remain in place, maybe with the reduction of existent sanctions. Almost half of the participants (46,67%) think that the use of high risk drugs (heroin, ecstasy, etc) will actually decrease if Romania will decriminalize cannabis and the possession should not be considered a offense.

Cannabis consumers are labeled as victims by the social workers and psychologists; in most of the case of the medical staff, they are considered to be sick or offenders and all the priests view the drug consumer as a low-willed person. Although the debate regarding decriminalization of cannabis is gaining momentum in Romania, professionals that are directly involved in this issue may not be as open to this. Their attitudes may be explained by their formal training and actual work experience with drug users/addicts, situations in which the negative effects of drugs may have been obvious. A more tolerant view on drug users/addicts could be enhanced by quality supervision throughout the specialized services that work on this issue, as "the need for supervision is one of the most important professional needs in education, social assistance, psychology and medicine" (Runca, Goian, Tiru, 2012, p. 183).

Social work is an important component when it comes to supporting drug addicts. They may find it hard to enter the labour market. Thus, the social worker can be involved in ensuring the conditions for employment: training, school completion or obtaining social support. Social economy can contribute, when it comes to labour market integration, if the person is also part of a vulnerable group (Goian, Vasiluța-Ştefanescu, 2013).

Although we can not state that Romania is facing the strong violence associated with drug trafficking, as other states, the negative effects of incrimination are present.

Incriminating certain substances encourages the creation of new, synthesized ones that are hardly discovered by the authorities and can have negative effects. The threshold quantities on cannabis possession can be implemented in Romania. Also, drug possession management can be done outside the criminal framework by imposing fines for cannabis possession intended for own consumption. It is important that the principle of proportionality for the penalties imposed on drug-related offenses to be respected. Better information on all aspects of drug use,

the implementation of programs in schools and universities, the development of better medical and social services remain paramount components of this issue.

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