

Down-classification of Cannabis – The Results. 20/01/07

Down-classification of cannabis in January 2004 in the UK has been a widely predicted disaster. In the following November, The Daily Telegraph (23/11/06) reported that between April and August, the number of people caught with cannabis in London was up by a third from the same period in the previous year, a rise from 6231 to 8148.

One reason given for changing the law was that it would free up more police time to combat the class A drugs, heroin and cocaine. The Sunday Times (July 9th 2006) said that in the 2 years since down-grading, heroin and cocaine use had also risen by one third, amounting to 90,000 extra users, making 340,000 in total. This was confirmed in a leaked Downing Street report from Tony Blair's strategy unit report on August 6th 2006, which said that cannabis use was boosting hard drug use, and on August 29th The Guardian carried the story of a massive increase in high-potency cannabis farms in quiet residential areas.

Cannabis use among 11 to 15 year olds has increased by 1%, a rise of many thousands of children in the country (200,000-300,000), in the first year of the new law (*Drug Use Smoking and Drinking among Young People in England in 2005:Headline Figures 2006*). Cocaine use had doubled to 2% of teenagers, 65,000 had taken it. Statistics from The Scottish Executive said that the number of people detained in hospital for cannabis-related mental and behavioural problems rose from 45 in 2002-3 to 136 in 2004-5, and the number of people admitted to hospital for cannabis-related mental illness in England rose by 40% since down-grading was suggested in 2001, from 580 to 710 (Parliamentary answer from Rosie Winterton MP to Andrew Lansley MP, on 30/01/06).

In September 2006, a UN report praising the Swedish drug policy revealed that Britain has a higher number of problem drug users than any other European country, nearly double the European average. Almost one in every 100 people between 15 and 64, is addicted to drugs. Only Spain recorded a higher use of cannabis among 15 to 24 year olds.

The Daily Mail on September 16th 2006 disclosed that the number of under-16s caught supplying illegal drugs had risen by almost 40% in 2 years. In the last year, 6000 had been arrested including 4 just 10 years old.

The Metropolitan police (The London Police) stated on September 18th 2006 that only 15% of those caught with cannabis had been charged with a crime since down-grading. Sixty seven per cent were given a warning, 17% were cautioned. The non-arrest of criminals, the police said, was having a positive effect in reducing the friction between young people and the police and was therefore good for police/public relations! (I'm sure speeding drivers would be similarly friendly to the police in such circumstances).

Britain tops the league for cocaine use among 15 to 34 year olds, 10.5% had tried it, and also among the 15 to 24 year olds, 6% had used it in the last year (EMCDDA November 23rd 2006).

Around 33,000,000 crimes are committed in Britain every year. Only 1% ends in punishment in the courts. Most of them result in fines, up to a third of which are never paid, or community punishments. Last year, 66,000 cannabis users were given warnings instead of being charged, up from 39,000 a year earlier (Daily Mail 3/1/07). And on January 6th 2007, The Mail reported that 57% of young arrestees between 17 and 24 admitted they had smoked the drug.

At the time of de-classification, the Government promised a campaign on cannabis to warn the public of its dangers especially its possible adverse effects on mental health.

The public is still waiting!

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