

Race, Cannabis and the Canadian War on Drugs

Akwasi Owusu-Bempah
Department of Sociology, U of T
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Twitter: @AOBempah

Conflicts of Interest

- Aurora Cannabis
- Doja Cannabis
- HEXO Corp
- RCU
- Canwe Growers

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No Data, No Problem – Not Quite



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The Argument

- Racialized war on drugs not just an “American problem”
- Limited access racially disaggregated data in Canada has made this difficult to empirically demonstrate
- We recently obtained access to and analyzed cannabis possession arrest data from six major Canadian cities
- Unsurprisingly: the situation is very much the same
- African Canadians and Indigenous people in particular are over-represented in arrest data for simple possession of cannabis in these major Canadian cities

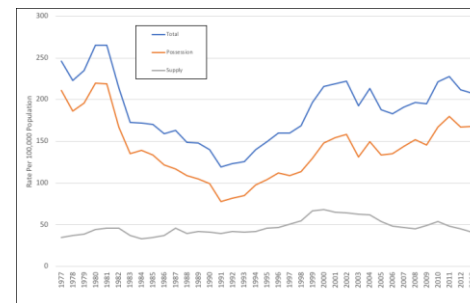
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Canada's War on Cannabis

- The Opium Act (1908)
- Cannabis unexpectedly criminalized in 1923
- 1960s: a surge in enforcement
- Le Dain Commission (1972)
- War on cannabis redux (1980s/90s)
- The Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (1996)

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Police reported cannabis offences 1977-2013. Data Source: Cotter et al. (2015)



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Race and Cannabis Arrests

- Canada lacks readily available race-based criminal justice data
- *Toronto Star* investigation:
 - Black people represent 8.4% of Toronto's population but accounted for 25.2% of individuals arrested for cannabis possession by Toronto Police Service (TPS) 2003-2013
 - By contrast, White Torontonians were arrested at a rate relatively similar to their representation in the general population
 - No data on arrests of Indigenous people

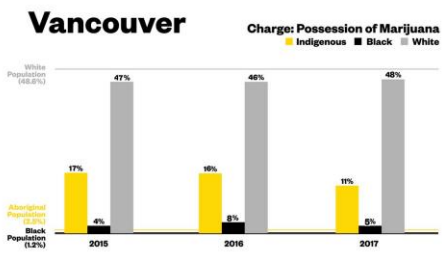
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Data and Method

- Worked with Vice News journalist Rachel Brown to obtain cannabis arrest data from major cities in Canada
- Obtained data through Freedom of Information requests
- Looked at arrests for simple possession as only charge

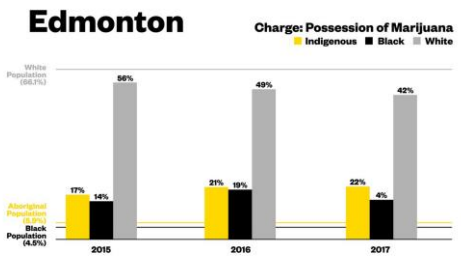
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Cannabis Arrest Data 2015-2017



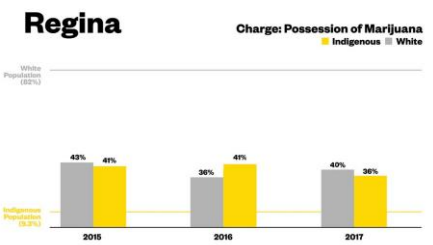
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Cannabis Arrest Data 2015-2017



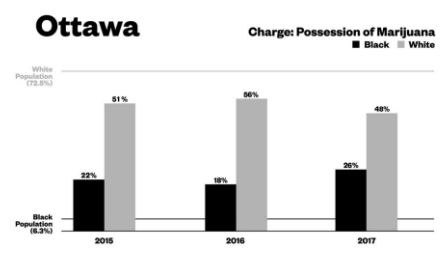
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Cannabis Arrest Data 2015-2017



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Cannabis Arrest Data 2015-2017



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Cannabis a Gateway Drug?

- Minor cannabis offences act as a gateway into the criminal justice system for our most marginalized populations.
- Contributes to criminalization and concentrates the consequences of incarceration.
 - Resulting in poor outcomes related to **education, employment, housing, physical** and **mental** health.

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Post Legalization - Lessons from the US

- While overall arrests are down, the racial disparities persist
- Legalized jurisdictions
 - Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Washington DC
- Decriminalized jurisdictions
 - Chicago, California
- De-policed jurisdictions
 - New York

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Moving Forward – Repairing the Harms

- Rectifying harms done to racialized communities
 - Federal legislation – Pardons for criminal convictions
 - Redistribution of cannabis tax revenue
 - Enhancing cannabis industry participation

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Moving Forward – Data Needs

- First, there is a need for agreement about the appropriate racial/ethnic data to collect (collapsed census categories).
- Need to expand the collection of data on nature and frequency of cannabis use (include race/ethnicity as variable in ongoing national surveys).
- Need to gather and expand race-based data collected by our criminal justice institutions as well. For arrests and fines/tickets.

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