

The need to monitor and reduce cannabis use among young offenders

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Key points

- Young offenders are continuing to use cannabis at extremely high rates despite a recent decline in use among young people in the general population
- Both experimentation and regular use of cannabis occur at a much younger age among those who spend time in custody
- Young offenders are at increased risk of developing problems associated with heavy and frequent cannabis use
- There is a need for more focused intervention and preventative efforts among this group in order to address the unabated high levels of cannabis use, crime and associated risk behaviours
- Regular monitoring of substance use trends and associated behaviours in juvenile justice settings can establish an evidence base which can inform targeted primary and secondary interventions

Introduction

Although cannabis remains the most widely used illicit drug in Australia, cannabis use among adolescents in the general community aged 14-19 years in the past 12 months has reduced significantly.¹ This trend of reducing cannabis use among young people, however, is not replicated among young offenders who spend time in detention facilities.

Young people who are involved in the criminal justice system in Australia tend to be characterised as having backgrounds of risk and vulnerability. Many come from situations of economic disadvantage, parental imprisonment and substance use and are more likely to be disengaged from education, training and employment.^{2,3} Regular participation in a range of risk-taking and thrill-seeking behaviours; particularly in relation to substance use is also common among this group.²

Both international and Australian research has found that young offenders tend to experiment with, and begin using regularly, both licit and illicit substances at a much younger age than non-offending youth.^{4,7} Such earlier onset of licit and illicit substance use is associated with increased harm, such as continued and escalating use of illicit substances, higher prevalence of substance use disorders, engagement in multiple health risk behaviours, increased criminal activity and more frequent and longer periods of incarceration.^{5, 8-11}

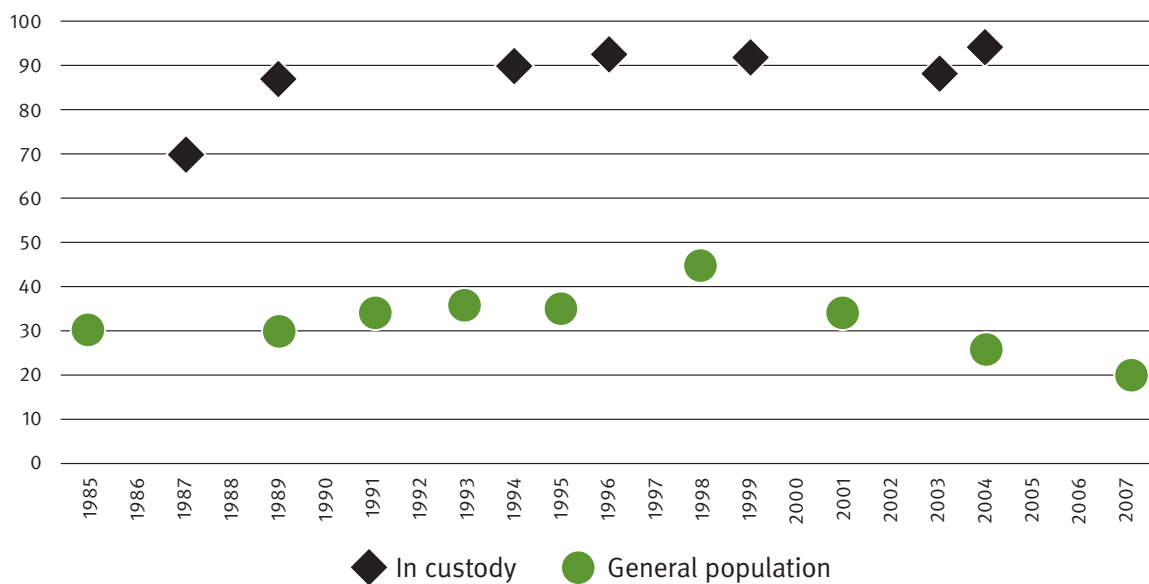
Prevalence of cannabis use among young people in custody

The substance use trends and patterns of use among incarcerated young people in Australia have not been routinely collected over time, nor is this population included in routine community health surveys.¹² There have, however, been some surveys conducted and the results published in an attempt to understand such patterns of use and related harms among this group. Most of these surveys though, have employed differing methodologies and lack standardization of questions related to substance use and risk behaviours, this in turn makes direct comparisons between them and national surveys difficult. That said, data that are available are of significant interest for both policy and program development.

Figure 1 compares the proportions of lifetime cannabis use between young people in custody and those in the general population, using available data.^{1, 3, 4, 7, 13-23} It is evident that almost all adolescents who spend time in custody have tried cannabis at some stage in their life and this trend appears to have remained quite stable over time. In contrast, cannabis use among the general population of the same age group has been steadily decreasing since 1998.

Figure 1

Lifetime cannabis use among adolescents (%)

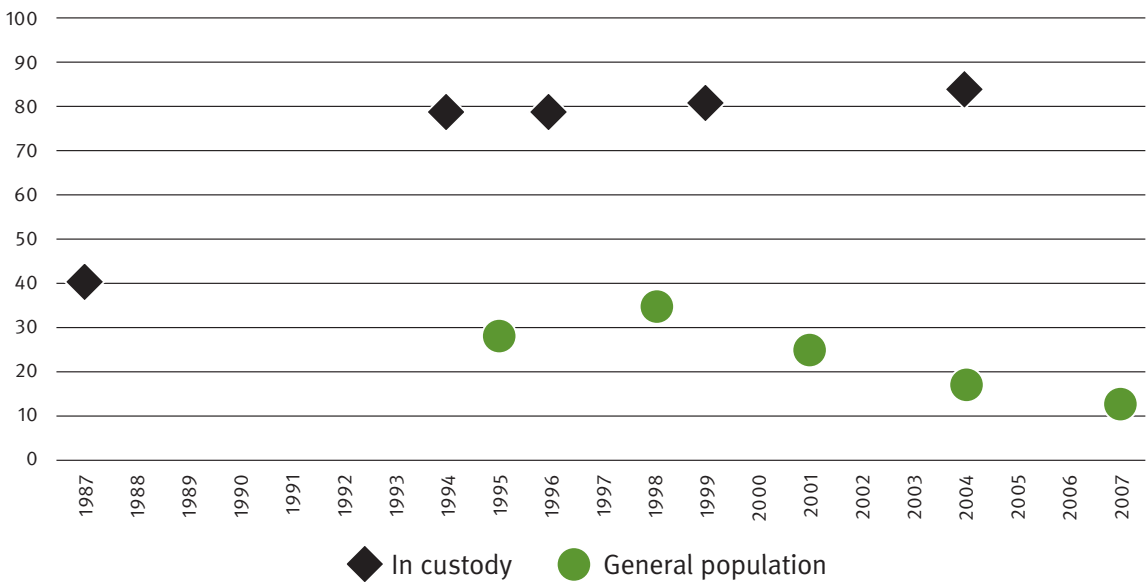


NB) Please interpret with caution. Please note, data of young people in custody does not represent Australian wide figures (1987 = Vic; 1989, 1994, 1999, 2003 = NSW; 1996 = QLD; and 2004 is Australia).

When plotting recent use of cannabis among the two groups mentioned above, a similar picture is found (Figure 2). While the recall period for young people in the general population was 12 months prior to interview and 1 month prior to custody for young offenders, this may still suggest that young offenders were much more likely to have recently used cannabis than young people in the general Australian population. Even though young people may increase their offending and cannabis use immediately prior to entering custody (which could inflate estimates of their levels of recent use), these statistics appear to support research suggesting that frequent cannabis use is strongly associated with juvenile crime.

Figure 2

Recent cannabis use among adolescents (%)



(NB) Please interpret with caution. Please note, data of young people in custody does not represent Australian wide figures (1987 = Vic; 1994, 1999 = NSW; 1996 = QLD; and 2004 is Australia).

The previous two graphs, although limited in a number of ways, present a clear difference between the cannabis use patterns of young people who spend time in detention and those in the general community, and thus reinforces the need for more focused interventions and preventative efforts to address cannabis use, associated crime and risk behaviours among young people who spend time in juvenile detention facilities. This point is further strengthened when cannabis use among adolescents who are taken into police custody is examined. It is evident when looking at the Drug Use Monitoring Australia (DUMA) data, that although levels of cannabis use among this group remains high, there has been an overall decline in the number of police detainees testing positive to cannabis between 1999 and 2007; mirroring what has occurred in the general community.²⁴

Associated risks of use among this population

Cannabis is often misrepresented as a ‘soft drug’, but the possible harms associated with its use are now well recognized. For high-risk young people, who initiate heavy and frequent cannabis use at an early age, multiple harms and associated problem behaviours are likely to emerge. The settings within which young offenders enact their lives and engage in crime and recreation often overlap with those who are older and more entrenched in their illegal activities. Consequently, such young people may adopt behaviours, for example the use of and patterns of use of specific illicit substances, less common in other youthful populations.

The general health risks and harms associated with cannabis use are well documented and therefore will not be discussed in full detail here. Cannabis use among young offenders, however, has been linked to increased risk of criminal offending; increased likelihood of progression to other illicit substances and poly-drug use; risky substance use and risky sexual behaviours.^{3, 9, 25, 26} Regular monitoring of this sentinel population, therefore, can be a useful way of keeping abreast of trends in substance use and risk behaviors, which can in turn, inform programs and prevention interventions in their efforts to reduce both substance use and offending among these young people.



Addressing cannabis use and associated risks among young offenders

Why is cannabis use, in particular recent use, decreasing among the general population but remaining at high levels among young offenders? There are perhaps a number of explanations for this, including the following:

- current public health messages about cannabis and other illicit substances are not reaching or appealing to this group;
- cannabis use forms part of a cluster of delinquent behaviours that these youth engage in; and
- cannabis is virtually ‘normalised’ in the peer and even family environments within which young offenders spend much of their time.

Whatever the contributors, high levels of cannabis use among this sub-section of the population remains problematic and requires greater attention.

Although the number of young people in detention across Australia has fluctuated over the years, there has been an increase in the total number of young people spending time in detention across some states, including a 12% increase in recorded numbers for NSW between 2003-04 and 2006-07.^{27, 28} Such increases can test the capacity of juvenile justice facilities in some states to accommodate and meet the complex needs of those incarcerated within them. Any reduction in juvenile offending leading to fewer arrests and fewer young people being placed in custody makes sense – both in terms of social wellbeing and the economic burden of providing correctional facilities that may achieve little in the way of ‘correction’.²⁹

Having better, timely and more reliable data with which to sharpen the thrust of efforts by those working with young offenders to reduce drug use and related harms and routinely available motivational and skills-based interventions may play a role in the reduction of recidivism related to heavy, regular cannabis use among this group.

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