

Just Facts

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Research and Statistics Division

Cannabis crime statistics in Canada, 2020

This fact sheet is based on data from the Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (CCJCSS) Juristat titled *Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020*.¹ It is an update to a similar JustFacts published in 2019 that was based on 2017 police-reported data. This fact sheet also highlights some of the preliminary impacts of the legalization of cannabis² on Canadian crime statistics.

It is important to consider the impact of COVID-19 when interpreting the data presented in this fact sheet as the pandemic brought about different conditions that may have affected trends in cannabis-related offences. For example, cannabis-related impaired driving rates may fluctuate as a result of the reduction in the availability of public transportation and ride share programs, and the increased stress and anxiety experienced among the population, which can lead to an increase in substance use. Alternatively, rates may also fluctuate when public order curfews are in effect and/or because of restaurant and bar closures, resulting in fewer people on the roads.

The Cannabis Act

The *Cannabis Act* came into force on October 17, 2018 and aims to keep cannabis out of the hands of youth, keep profits out of the pockets of criminals, and protect public health and safety by allowing adults access to legal cannabis. The Act provides a legal framework for the legalization and regulation of the production, distribution, sale, possession, importation and exportation of cannabis in Canada. All prior cannabis-related legislation under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (CDSA) was replaced with the *Cannabis Act*. Legal changes include allowing adults aged 18 or older to possess and share up to 30 grams of legal cannabis with other adults, as well as making it illegal to sell or give cannabis to anyone under the age of 18.³

¹ Morneau, G. 2021. *Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020*. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00013-eng.htm#:~:text=Police-reported%20crime%20in%20Canada%2C%20as%20measured%20by%20the,a%20base%20index%20value%20of%20100%20for%202006>.

² *Cannabis Act* (S.C. 2018, c. 16). Retrieved from: <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-24.5/>.

³ Department of Justice. 2021. *Cannabis Legalization and Regulation*. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-ip/cannabis/>.

Following its legalization, cannabis-related drug offences made up a much smaller proportion of all drug offences; less than one-fifth compared to a little over two-thirds prior to legalization^{4, 5}

In 2020, there were just over 66,800 drug offences reported by police, representing a rate of 176 offences per 100,000 population. Cannabis-related drug offences—which include offences related to possession, trafficking, production and import/export—accounted for 19% of all drug offences reported by police, the lowest proportion of cannabis offences relative to all drug-related offences since 1986. From 1986 to 2015, on average, cannabis-related offences accounted for 68% of all drug offences.⁶

Specifically, the 2020 rate of cannabis-related offences (per 100,000 population) decreased by 25% from the previous year; rates decreased in all provinces and territories, with the exception of Nunavut (+119%), British Columbia (+30%) and New Brunswick (+7%; see Table 1).

The rates of drug-related offences involving other substances also saw a decrease from 2019 to 2020, including heroin (-15%), ecstasy (-7%), methamphetamine (-5%) and cocaine-related drug offences (-2%). Opioid (+34%)⁷ and other drug-related offences (+4%)⁸ were the only drug types to show an increased rate during this time.

The majority of cannabis-related offences were for importation or exportation

In 2020, police reported 12,591 cannabis-related offences under the *Cannabis Act* and *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*, representing a rate of 33

Cannabis (includes possession, trafficking, production or import/export)			
Province or Territory	Number	Rate per 100,000 population	Percent change in rate, 2019 to 2020
Newfoundland and Labrador	93	18	-13%
Prince Edward Island	7	4	-31%
Nova Scotia	182	19	-12%
New Brunswick	182	23	7%
Quebec	3,616	42	-57%
Ontario	2,650	18	-15%
Manitoba	139	10	-5%
Saskatchewan	152	13	-5%
Alberta	263	6	-27%
British Columbia	5,233	102	30%
Yukon	9	21	-11%
Northwest Territories	27	60	-10%
Nunavut	38	97	119%
Canada	12,591	33	-25%

Table 1. Police-reported crime for cannabis-related offences, by province and territory, 2020

Source: Moreau, G. 2021. "Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020." Table 5, page 51. Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (CCJCSS). Retrieved from:

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00013/tbl/tbl05-eng.htm>.

⁴ Moreau, G. 2021. *Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020*. Table 5, page 51. Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (CCJCSS). Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00013/tbl/tbl05-eng.htm>.

⁵ As a result of the coming into force of the *Cannabis Act* on October 17, 2018, all prior cannabis-related legislation under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (CDSA) has been replaced with the *Cannabis Act*. A select few historical offences were reported under prior CDSA cannabis legislation and are included in the total cannabis offences category, accounting for 1% of total cannabis offences in 2020 and 3% of total cannabis offences in 2019. Therefore, the sum of all *Cannabis Act* offences will not equal total cannabis offences.

⁶ Moreau, G. 2021. *Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020*. Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (CCJCSS). Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00013/tbl/tbl05-eng.htm>.

⁷ It is important to note that although these statistics decreased, the opioid crisis has a polysubstance nature and when reported, only one drug type is indicated as the most serious violation of a particular offence. This can impact how some drug offences are reported, specifically it can result in the underreporting of drug offences related to methamphetamine and cocaine.

⁸ Includes all other drugs listed under the CDSA, such as prescription drugs, barbiturates, LSD and "drugs used to facilitate sexual assault."

offences per 100,000 population. The most commonly reported offences were related to importation or exportation (61% of all *Cannabis Act* offences),⁹ followed by possession¹⁰ (11%) and distribution (9%). Comparatively, in 2017, prior to the legalization of cannabis, offences related to possession accounted for a little over three-quarters (78%) of all cannabis-related offences.

Rates of adults and youth charged with cannabis-related offences decreased post-legalization^{11, 12}

In 2017 (i.e., pre-legalization), there were 16,697 adults charged with cannabis-related offences, representing a rate of 57 per 100,000 population aged 18 years and over. In 2020 (i.e., two years post-legalization), there were 2,550 adults charged with cannabis-related offences, representing a rate of 8 per 100,000 population. This is an 85% decrease in the rate since before the legalization of cannabis (2017). Adults in 2020 were more commonly charged for cannabis offences related to distribution (33% of all adults charged with cannabis-related offences), followed by those related to production (23%) and sale (22%).

Among youth, there were 1,858 young persons charged with cannabis-related offences in 2017, representing a rate of 78 per 100,000 population aged 12 to 17 years. In 2020, there were 249 youth charged with cannabis-related offences, representing a rate of 10 per 100,000 population. This is an 87% decrease in the rate since before the legalization of cannabis (2017). Youth in 2020 were more commonly charged for cannabis offences related to possession (50% of all youth charged with cannabis-related offences), followed by those related to sale (22%) and distribution (20%).

Drug-impaired driving rates increased following *Criminal Code* amendments in response to cannabis legalization^{13, 14, 15}

The *Act to Amend the Criminal Code (Offences Related to Conveyances) and to make consequential amendments to other Acts* was implemented in 2018 to modernize, simplify and strengthen impaired driving laws, and to create new and stronger laws to combat drug-impaired driving. In response to the legalization of cannabis, these changes created three new offences for being over a prohibited blood

⁹ In 2020, the highest importation or exportation rates were recorded in British Columbia (83 per 100,000 population). Statistics Canada. Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations, Canada, provinces, territories and Census Metropolitan Areas, Table 35-10-0177-01. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3510017701>.

¹⁰ Under the *Cannabis Act*, possession is only illegal under certain circumstances.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For ease of reading, the rates reported in this section have been rounded. However, the changes in rates, reported as percentage increases/decreases between 2017 and 2020, were calculated using non rounded rates. For this reason, the reported percentage change in rates may not add up to the difference between the two reported rates..

¹³ *An Act to amend the Criminal Code (offences relating to conveyances) and to make consequential amendments to other Acts* (S.C. 2018, c. 21). Retrieved from: https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/annualstatutes/2018_21/.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations, Canada, provinces, territories and Census Metropolitan Areas, Table 35-10-0177-01. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3510017701>.

¹⁵ For ease of reading, the rates reported in this section have been rounded. However, the changes in rates, reported as percentage increases/decreases between 2017 and 2020, were calculated using non rounded rates. For this reason, the reported percentage change in rates may not add up to the difference between the two reported rates.

drug concentration level within two hours of driving, and authorized police to use approved oral fluid drug screening equipment at the roadside.

The rate of drug-impaired driving offences¹⁶ increased 105% from 2017 to 2020 (9 to 19 offences per 100,000 population, respectively). Due to the new legislation, police have additional means available to them to detect drug-impaired driving, which may in part explain this increase. The rate of drug-impaired driving offences increased in all but two jurisdictions: British Columbia (+212%), Yukon (+163%), Prince Edward Island (+142%), Ontario (+133%), New Brunswick (+130%), Quebec (+88%), Newfoundland and Labrador (+83%), Saskatchewan (+65%), Nova Scotia (+58%), Manitoba (+48%) and Alberta (+47%). The Northwest Territories (-30%), and Nunavut (-11%) recorded the only decreases.

¹⁶ Though this factsheet presents information on cannabis-related offences, the rate of cannabis-specific impaired driving offences is not currently available. As a result, the rate of drug-exclusive impaired driving offences more broadly is used, which includes drug-impaired operation of a vehicle, drug-impaired operation of a vehicle causing bodily harm, and drug-impaired operation of a vehicle causing death. It is also important to note that this excludes offences where the individual is under the influence of both alcohol and drugs.