

EXPERIENCES WITH REGULATING
CANNABIS IN URUGUAY:
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF A
MIDDLE-GROUND OPTION

Rosario Queirolo, PhD
Department of Social Sciences
Universidad Católica del Uruguay

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OUTLINE

- Why Uruguay legalized cannabis
- How
- Lessons from the Uruguayan experience
- Ideas for future legalizations

WHY

- The first country to fully regulate production, commercialization, and consumption 2013
- **Reasons** for regulation very different from the U.S. and Canada:
 - One of the measures to respond to public insecurity: reduce the leverage of criminal organizations tied to drug-trafficking, increase public security.
 - Decriminalize users
 - Increase public health
 - No economic or fiscal purpose

HOW

- **Mechanism** for regulation very different from the U.S. and Canada:
 - Top-down public policy: President José Mujica's (left wing party)
 - 60% of Uruguayans were against the law.

HOW

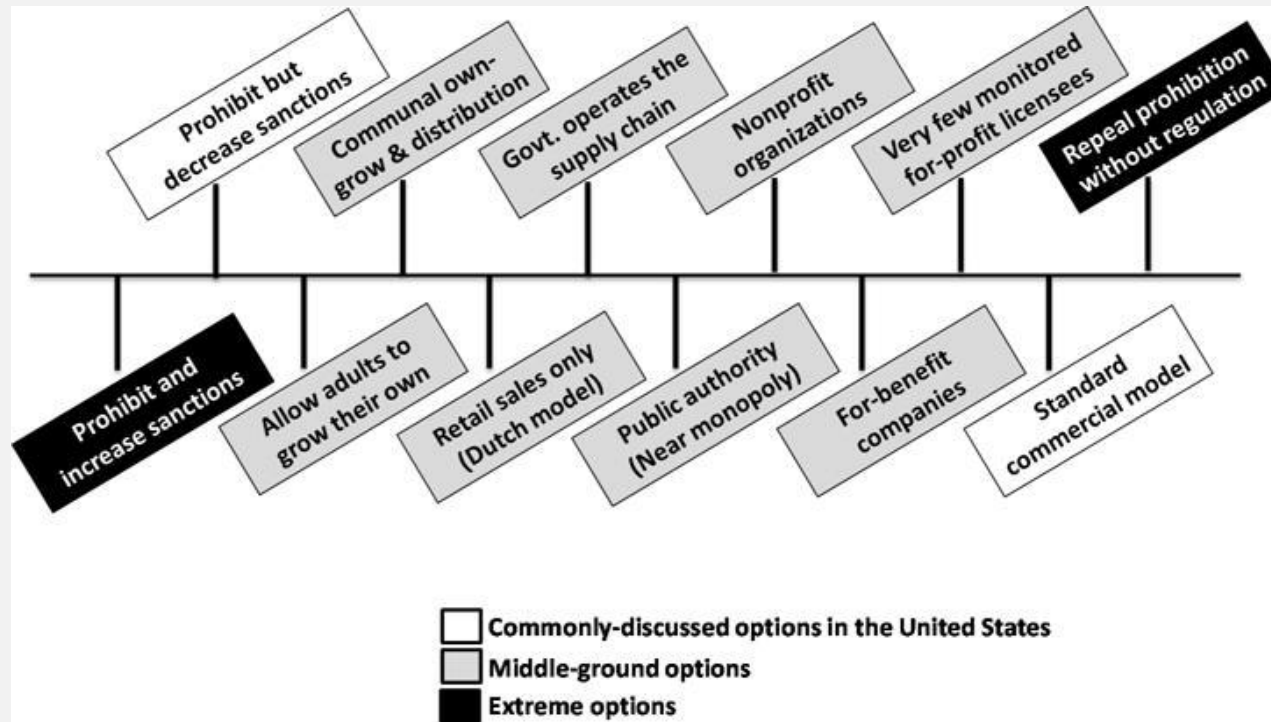
- Government-oriented regulation
- Strict regulations:
 - Mandatory register for users
 - Maximum amount of cannabis per user: 40 grams per month/ 480 grams per year
 - No advertisement is allowed
 - No selling to tourists
 - Only flowers, no edibles, no tinctures, no oils



HOW

- Three ways to access cannabis for adult users (18+) that are exclusionary
 - Home growing:
 - Up to 6 female flowering plants per household
 - 14.028 registered, more than the double unregistered
 - No potency controls
 - Cannabis Social Clubs
 - Non-profit civic society organizations (243)
 - Up to 99 plants in the club,
 - Among 15-45 members (total 7.085)
 - Surplus yield must be turned over to the authorities
 - Pharmacies
 - Produced by five licensed producers/ Sold by pharmacies (25)
 - 49.475 users, up to 10 grams per week

HOW? A MIDDLE-GROUND OPTION



Source: Caulkins et al. 2015

LESSONS

- The effects of recreational cannabis legalization might depend upon the policy model
- Depends on the purpose/objective:
 - Public security
 - Users decriminalization
 - Public health

LESSONS: PUBLIC SECURITY

- Reduce the black market, narco trafficking
- Reduce users contact with illegal activity

REDUCE THE BLACK MARKET

- Fix a low price at pharmacies (10 dollars per 5 grams), so it is competitive with the illegal cannabis
- Many traditional dealers stop selling cannabis
- Around 30% of users consume legal cannabis
- New actors: “cogolleros”, new producers that sell cannabis
- Emergence of a new “grey market”
 - Not enough pharmacies that sell and experience shortage
 - Strict regulations (prohibition for home growers and CSC to sell surplus, prohibition to sell to tourists, quantities)
- **Reform helped achieve the objective of reducing the cannabis black market, but no detectable impact on crime (too ambitious for cannabis?)**

CONTACT WITH ILLEGAL ACTIVITY

- Less contact with dealers & illegal drugs selling points (Queirolo 2020):
 - before regulation 70%, in 2017 decreased to 50%
 - buy from friends increased from 30% to 50% (grey market)
- Reform has helped to diminish contact among users and illegal sellers, however many still combine legal & illegal mechanisms of access

LESSONS: DECRIMINALIZATION

- Cannabis use and possession for “personal consumption” is legal in Uruguay since 1974.
- But police officers and judges interpret “personal consumption” in different ways leading to arrest and imprisonment
- After the regulation was passed:
 - Very few incidents among growers or CSC and the police/judicial system
- New government (since 2020) has increased prosecution of microtraffic
- Reform helped achieve the objective during the first years, now is uncertain

LESSONS: PUBLIC HEATH

- Substance quality
- Protect young people from early use

SUBSTANCE QUALITY

- Recreational cannabis that is sold in pharmacies is low in THC level. Designed as such to avoid high potency (not more than 9%). Controlled by the government.
- Home growers and cannabis social clubs produce high potency cannabis: CSC members declare an average of 22% THC (Alvarez et al., 2022)
- Is it working?
 - Before the regulation, 66% of frequent marijuana consumers use “prensado” and in 2017 only 14%. Flowers use increased from 33% to 86%
- Reform helped achieve the objective because it had improved substance quality and control

PROTECT YOUNG PEOPLE FROM EARLY USE

- Prohibition to sell to minors (less than 18 years old)
- Edibles or other derivatives are not allowed, no advertisement
- Is it working?
 - Life prevalence has increased through time among young people (13-17): 11,9 (2003), 16,2 (2009), 20,1 (2014), 25,3 (2016) & 24,8 (2018)
 - But regulation **has not been associated** with increases in past or past month use, or with multi-year changes in any risky and frequent use

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International Journal of Drug Policy

Volume 80, June 2020, 102748

Research Paper

The impact of cannabis legalization in Uruguay on adolescent cannabis use

Hannah Laqueur ^a , Ariadne Rivera-Aguirre ^b, Aaron Shev ^a, Alvaro Castillo-Carniglia ^{b, c}, Kara E. Rudolph ^d, Jessica Ramirez ^e, Silvia S. Martins ^d, Magdalena Cerdá ^b

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Abstract

ADDICTION

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RESEARCH REPORT

Does recreational cannabis legalization change cannabis use patterns? Evidence from secondary school students in Uruguay

Ariadne Rivera-Aguirre , Alvaro Castillo-Carniglia, Hannah S. Laqueur, Kara E. Rudolph, Silva S. Martins, Jessica Ramirez, Rosario Queirolo, Magdalena Cerdá

First published: 02 May 2022 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15913>

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TOOLS



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Abstract

Background and Aims

In 2013, Uruguay became the first country to legalize and regulate the production and distribution of cannabis for recreational use. We measured whether Uruguay's non-commercial model of recreational cannabis legalization was associated with changes in the prevalence of risky and frequent cannabis use among secondary school students.

Design

We used data from repeated cross-sectional surveys of secondary students in Uruguay and Chile (2007–2018). Using a difference-in-difference approach, we evaluated changes



LESSONS: PUBLIC HEALTH

- Middle ground reform helped achieve the objective of substance quality
- No impact on increasing use among young people
- More work is needed to test the impact on adults, heavy users and potency.

AFTER 9 YEARS, LESSONS FROM THE URUGUAYAN MODEL OF CANNABIS REGULATION:

- Middle-ground model helped to:
 - Decriminalize users, but uncertain now
 - Diminish contact between cannabis users and illegal sellers
 - Improve substance quality and controls
 - Reduce the black market
- But also create a grey market due to shortages in pharmacies, emphasis on registration & quantities, and not selling to tourists

IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

- The effects of recreational cannabis legalization might depend upon the policy model
- There are options outside the commercial model. Pay attention to middle ground options
- Cannabis legalizations are new, so it is important to monitor, evaluate and be flexible to change regulations

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Thanks

rosario.queirolo@ucu.edu.uy