

Marijuana usage has doubled in 10 years 57% support legalization

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OTTAWA - Canadians are smoking marijuana more than ever and the majority want people left to use it in peace, new surveys released yesterday suggest.

A new poll for the advocacy group NORML Canada shows for the first time that more than half of Canadians effectively support legalization, with 57% reporting people should be "left alone" if they are caught with small amounts of marijuana for personal use.

A advance copy of the survey was given to CanWest News Service yesterday, the same day the federal government released a study of 13,000 Canadians showing marijuana use has doubled in the past decade.

Fourteen per cent of those surveyed for the federal study said they smoked pot in the last year, up from 7.4% in 1994. The study also revealed that almost 30% of 15- to 17-year-olds and 47% of 18- and 19-year-olds had used marijuana in the past year.

"This is really a rude awakening for the government," said Jody Pressman, executive director of the NORML Canada. "Government is going in the wrong direction if it thinks decriminalization is a step forward," said Ms. Pressman, whose pro-marijuana group commissioned the poll.

The survey also reveals only 8% support criminalizing marijuana if it leads to jail time. Another 32% believe pot possession should be punished by fines rather than criminal records, a middle ground that is currently proposed in a federal bill winding its way through Parliament.

NORML wants the federal government to scrap its controversial decriminalization bill and bring in an end to prohibition and begin regulating the industry.

"It's easier to get marijuana on a schoolground today than it is to get alcohol or cigarettes because we don't apply the same regulatory measures to marijuana to keep it away from young people," Ms. Pressman said.

The telephone survey of 1,000 adults was conducted by SES Research of Ottawa from Oct. 26 to Nov. 1.

The results are considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times in 20.

The support for legalization appears to have spiked since last fall, when a Decima Research poll of 2,015 Canadians showed that only 40% opposed a state ban on pot smoking.



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Canada's position on decriminalizing pot is likely to become an irritant in its relations with the United States.

SES president Nikita Nanos attributed the hike to the government "normalizing" marijuana use through its policy of allowing people to smoke for medicinal purposes.

While the latest poll reveals that only 8% support criminalization if it means going to jail, it did not gauge opinion on the far more likely scenario of people receiving a criminal record but escaping jail time.

The federal marijuana bill, which was revived last month after two earlier attempts failed, proposes to eliminate criminal records, replacing them with fines of \$100 or more for people caught with less than 15 grams, the equivalent of about 15 cigarettes.

The survey also found that just over half of Canadians support government regulation of the pot industry and 37% are against it, while 27% were uncertain.

A Senate report two years ago also called on the government to end its marijuana prohibition and implement a system to regulate its production, distribution and consumption.

Legalizing and regulating the industry would bring in more than \$2-billion a year in extra government tax revenue, the Fraser Institute, an economic think-tank, estimated in a recent report.

The survey shows Canadians are softening on marijuana laws at a time when police, the business community and the U.S. are stepping up their opposition.

The study and the poll were released less than a week before George W. Bush, the U.S. President, comes to Canada. Canada's position has been an irritant to the White House and could emerge as a contentious issue during the presidential visit.

Paul Cellucci, the U.S. ambassador, reiterated American opposition last week when he predicted liberalizing the law in Canada would lead to increased checks at the already congested borders.

An influential business group, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, also jumped into the debate by saying that the marijuana decriminalization will exacerbate the multibillion-dollar problem of substance abuse in the workplace.

The poll also provides a breakdown of public opinion, showing that Quebec residents, renters, and Canadians 18 to 29 and 40 to 59 are most likely to support a "hands-off" approach.

Westerners were evenly divided on government intervention and Ontario and Atlantic Canada hovered around the national average. In Quebec, 68% of respondents reported that people should be "left alone" to smoke pot in peace.

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