

In a glimpse

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Cannabis policy implementation in Ontario (2018-2022)

Canada legalised cannabis for non-medical use in October 2018. While the federal government organises the production of cannabis, it has left it up to its 13 provinces and territories to define a distribution and retail model. Ontario, the most populous province and largest cannabis market in Canada, is at the forefront of this process.

Cannabis policy implementation is a multi-faceted challenge and involves a large set of stakeholders. For one thing, implementation has been a constant process of negotiation between health and economic objectives. From this constant negotiation has stemmed new concerns, and potential shortcomings of the current policies are slowly being revealed.

What is Ontario's cannabis policy framework and, most importantly, how has it been put into practice? How is the cannabis market structured in Ontario? What are the key trends in the retail space? What are the implementation challenges that stakeholders face with regards to public health, the economy, and vulnerable populations? These are the main questions addressed by this summary report. More broadly, this report attempts to highlight and understand the adverse and unplanned outcomes of legalization in Ontario. It relies on two data sources: interviews with cannabis policy stakeholders and an institutional literature review.

In section 1, an overview of the Ontarian experience with legalization is provided, tracing back the evolution of Ontario's cannabis policy and regulations. Then, an account of the network of cannabis policy stakeholders in Ontario is presented, i.e. the cannabis policy implementation ecosystem. In section 2, the cannabis economy in Ontario is discussed, with a focus on the main developments in the Ontarian cannabis industry and the key cannabis retail market data and their broader implications for legalization. In section 3, the relationship between the retail market and cannabis users in Ontario is discussed, in order to identify the main trends in the legal retail market (prices, products) and the current data on patterns and outcomes of cannabis use since legalization. Section 4 addresses the challenges of legalization for public health, the economy and vulnerable populations that were identified by interviewees. The latter section lays the groundwork for future policy intervention by accounting for the challenges faced by the main parties in implementation.

Challenges of cannabis policy implementation, as per study participants

Public health	Economy	Vulnerable populations
Insufficient resources for enforcement	Excise tax	Barriers to access for homeless populations
Prohibitive regulations, attitudes and decision making	Capital-intensive industry	No resources dedicated to vulnerable populations
Increased cannabis normalization	Ontario Cannabis Store' preference for large orders	Inadequate criminal records expungement system
THC race and THC value-hacking	Turnover of order payments	No inclusion and equity policies in the cannabis economy
Information gap for users	Strict marketing regulations	Resources beyond official languages
Number of retail stores and store density	Price competitiveness with the illegal market	Inadequate physician education
Size of the illegal market	Job loss crisis	Inequity for hospitalized patients
Concomitant use of cannabis and other drugs	Store clustering	
Knowledge and interventions on edible products	Lack of industry champion in public institutions	
Private retail model	Lack of communication between stakeholders	
Prevention on therapeutic misuses	Lack of economic support from public institutions	
Lack of co-construction of interventions	Provincial retail model diversity	
Research gap/Evaluation gap		

This monograph is part of a collective research project entitled “ASTRACAN – Pour une Analyse STRAtégique des politiques de régulation du CANnabis” (“For A strategic Analysis of Regulatory Cannabis Policies”), financed by the Fund for Combatting Addiction (FLCA¹) and led by French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT). This comparative analysis of cannabis regulation models focused on three Canadian jurisdictions (Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia) and three American jurisdictions (California, Washington State, and Oregon). The reports for Quebec (Benoit, 2023) and British Columbia (Obradovic, 2023) are available online. The summary report on the three US cases will be available shortly.

Further reading

The report [Cannabis policy implementation in Ontario \(2018-2022\)](#), Gabriel Lévesque, 47 p.

Benoit M. (2023) [La régulation du cannabis au Canada : études de cas. Bilan de la mise en œuvre de la légalisation du cannabis au Québec \(2018-2022\)](#). Paris, OFDT, 58 p.

Obradovic I. (2023) [La régulation du cannabis au Canada : études de cas. La légalisation du cannabis en Colombie-Britannique : genèse, mise en œuvre et bilan \(2018-2022\)](#). Paris, OFDT, 73 p.

¹ This fund contributes to the financing of actions to combat all addictions, both those linked to psychoactive substances (tobacco, alcohol and illicit substances) and those known as "substance-free" (screens, video games, gambling).