

# Evaluating Danish Cannabis Policy Change

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## Abstract

Around 2001 a new approach in Danish cannabis control policy was introduced. The traditional Danish focus on harm reduction gradually gave way to a policy of supply and demand reduction. This move away from 30 years of Danish cannabis policy included no strategic framework, no coordinating mechanisms, no plans for evaluation and no earmarked funding.

This paper attempts a preliminary evaluation along two paths:

- Unreported data along EMCDDA's key indicators for drug policy evaluation
- Alternative measure of enforcement pressure<sup>1</sup>

The available quality of the data on cannabis prices is severely flawed, particularly the lack of information on sample size and price distribution.

Enforcement pressure among the total population has remained low at about 0.5%, but has risen markedly among young male cannabis users in Copenhagen to about 12% in 2006.

Presently there are two barriers to a more thorough evaluation: The lack of interest in drug policy evaluation from policy makers and a traditional culture of secrecy in the Danish police force.

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<sup>1</sup> Kilmer (2003): Cannabis Report 2002.

Around 2001 a new approach in Danish cannabis control policy was introduced. The traditional Danish focus on harm reduction gradually gave way to a policy of supply and demand reduction. In 2003 an Action plan named The Fight Against Drugs was introduced and a series of laws were passed to make the intentions operational. Significantly, the possession of cannabis for personal use (less than ten grams<sup>[1]</sup>) was no longer tolerated; penalty levels increased and the police were given easier access to ‘untraditional’ investigative tools, such as surveillance and use of agents.

A series of crackdowns on open cannabis markets in Copenhagen followed.

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This paper attempts a preliminary evaluation along two paths:

- Unreported data along EMCDDA’s key indicators for drug policy evaluation
- Alternative measure of enforcement pressure<sup>[2]</sup>

## **Standard European Drug Policy Evaluation Practices**

The EMCDDA’s work towards forming a basis for comparative European drug policy evaluation and analysis calls for the countries to report on the following key indicators:

1. Use rates
2. Purity data
3. Price data
4. Arrest data
5. Estimated public expenditure

Denmark routinely reports on use rates, but of all the member states in the European Union, Denmark is the most reluctant in reporting on purity, prize, arrests and estimated public expenditures, i.e. the data compiled by the police. Most of these data are registered, but not published. I have procured most of these data through seeking right of access with the police.

For now, no attempt is made at measuring public expenditure.

## **Use Rates**

Among the European countries young people in Denmark place very high in all categories of alcohol and drug use. Regarding cannabis the biggest self-report study[3] found a decline in use rates from 10 percent of total population between 16 and 44 reporting last year use in 2000, to 8 percent in 2005. As usual young men are over represented, as are inhabitants of the capital Copenhagen.

The figures contain several indicators that a rise in use rates in the late 1990's is declining, leaving a smaller and older cohort of users.

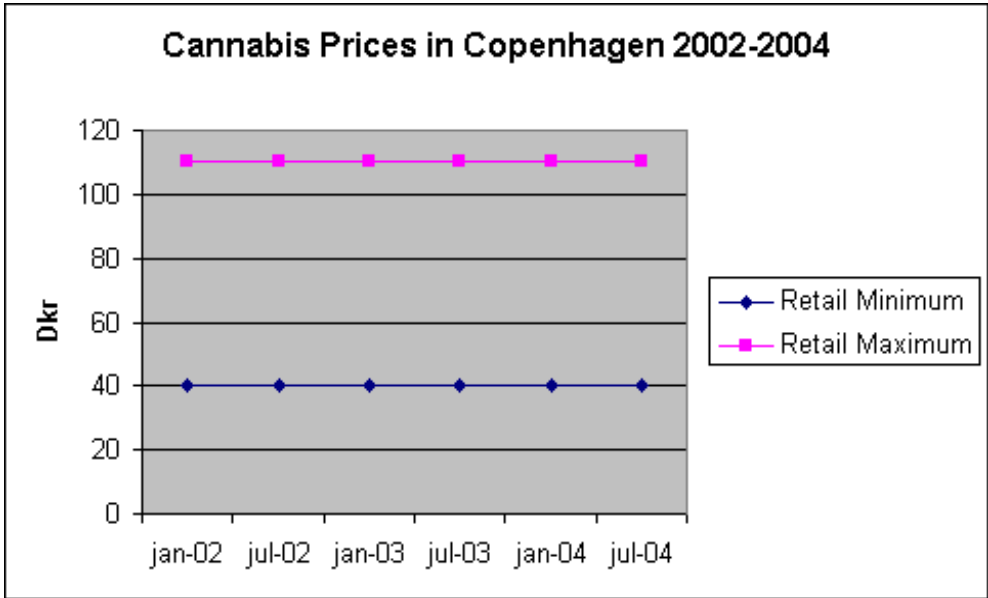
## **Purity Data**

Denmark does not report purity data to EMCDDA. The Forensic Institute at the university routinely analyses the potency of drugs at street-level, except for cannabis[4].

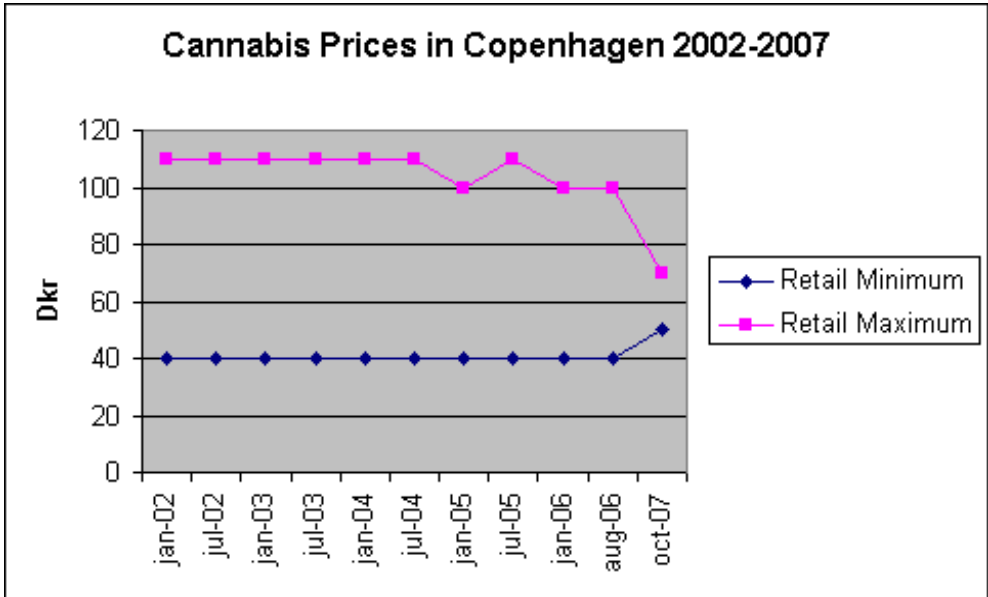
## **Price data**

Following the crackdown on Christiania Danish police reported of cannabis prices on the rise in general[5]. In a report from the National Police on organized crime in Denmark this statement is contradicted[6].

I sought right of access to the documents on cannabis prices. Danish police registers retail and wholesale prices every six months in the ten biggest cities on a variety of drugs, including cannabis. The Police's National Central Bureau (NEC) granted me access to the price data from 2002 to 2004, citing the age of the information as the reason for allowing the data to be published. Unfortunately the data stop right at the most interesting time, i.e. right after the crackdown on Christiania.



A little later Copenhagen's Police Advocacy on Organized Crime sent me the data from post-Christiania crackdown. The National Central Bureau's secrecy was well warranted.



The quality of the data is poor. There is no specification of sample size, no mean or modal price.

In the absence of any purity data their relevance is inconsequential.

EMCDDA's other data on price and purity for cannabis, especially from The Netherlands, show a clear relation between price and purity. This is supported by reports from an undercover police agent working in Christiania and informant interviews.

The relevance of the price data and the Risks and Prices<sup>[7]</sup> framework, when applied to cannabis resin in Copenhagen, is in analysing cost-structures and risk probabilities for different types of markets. For example: Even within Christiania there were significant differences in price between one part of Pusher Street and another part, as demonstrated by surveillance and undercover buys. The more secluded location had significantly lower prices.

This pattern applies to the different open markets in Copenhagen as well. Prices in hashclubs and street markets around Copenhagen are higher according to police reports. The qualitative characteristics of the cost structure in the different markets make it plausible. Both the incapacitated dealer and the undercover police agent state that the stability and local support for the Christiania market made "personal relations and service" possible, meaning discounts for known customers as well distribution system based on stable social relations.

## **Arrest Data**

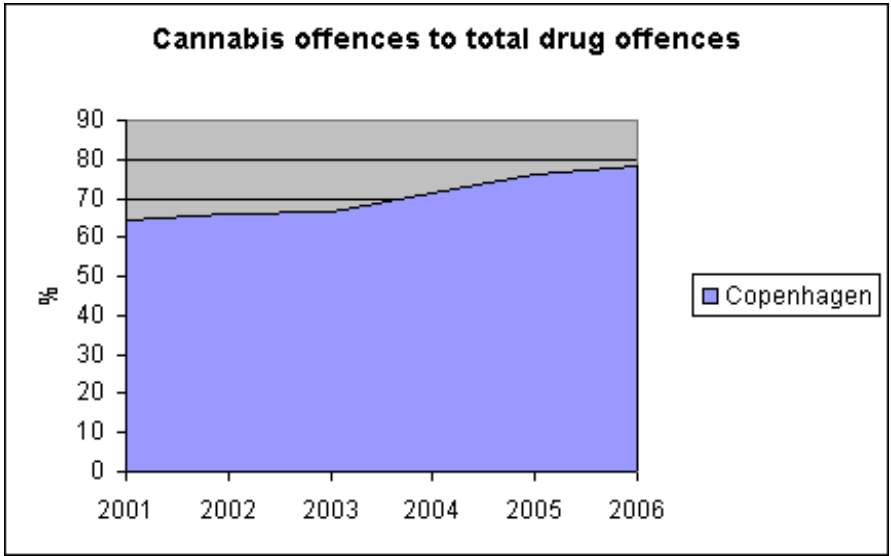
The two most relevant figures for estimating the enforcement pressure on cannabis markets that the EMCDDA has published (2005):

- "Cannabis-related offences: percentage among total drug law offences, 1996 to 2003"
- "Percentage of total drug law offences that are related to drug use or possession for use, 1996 to 2003".

Denmark didn't report on either percentage for these tables and the figures aren't readily deducible from the official crime statistics.

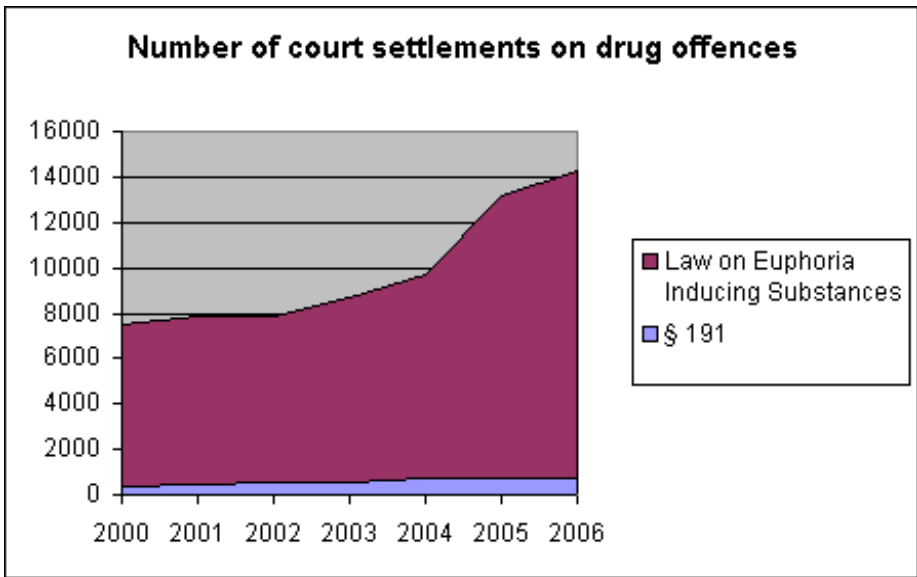
One exception. For the EMCDDA 2007 report Denmark submitted a rate for possession to selling arrests at 85.9% for the year 2005, with no explanation as to how this figure was generated.

The figure for cannabis-related offences to total drug offences is publicly available from the police statistics on drug confiscations.



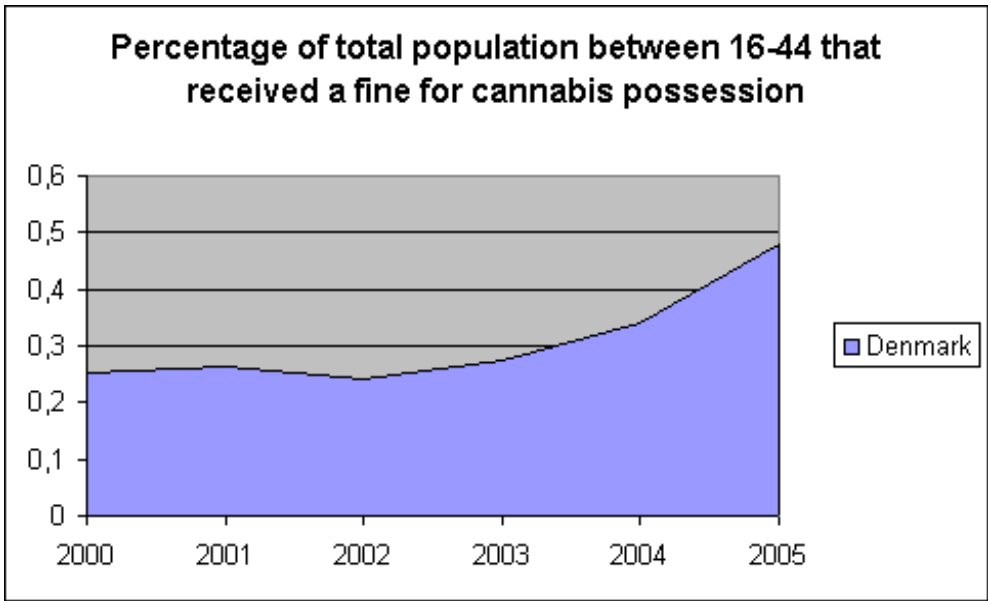
For Denmark the ratio has been stable around 75-80%

Possession offences are not registered separately. The official criminal statistics include figures for less serious and serious drug law offences. The ratio has been stable at 95% less serious offences.



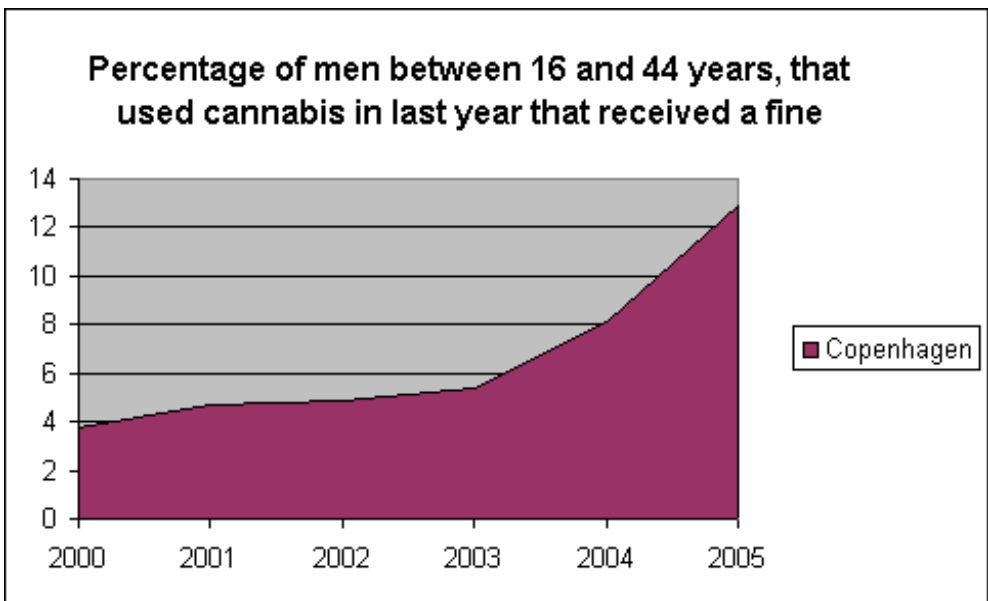
### Enforcement Pressure

A better expression of enforcement pressure is the: “probability of being arrested for a cannabis offence” (Kilmer 2002). Using the number of cannabis confiscations makes an approximation in the absence of data on possession offences. Simply dividing the number of cannabis confiscation by the population arrives at the first expression of enforcement pressure ”percentage of total population”.



The next expression of enforcement pressure gives a more realistic picture of the actual risks associated with buying cannabis in Copenhagen.

The figures are arrived at by percentage of males among minor drug offenders (stable around 90%) multiplied by number of cannabis confiscations (as an approximation of possession arrests) and divided by the total number of male cannabis users in Copenhagen (extrapolated from use figures).



The age cohort 16-44 is used since the best self-report study uses this. It is not unreasonable. The average age for persons charged with a minor drug crime is approximately 29 years.

## **Conclusions**

The quality of the data on cannabis prices is severely flawed, particularly the lack of information on sample size and price distribution. This could relatively easily be fixed with little to no extra cost.

The lack of data on purity is not as grave, hence the assumption of price/quality connection. An official evaluation of the cannabis policy change could benefit greatly from price/quality analysis of cannabis from different types of markets represented in Copenhagen's retail market.

Presently there are two barriers to a more thorough evaluation: The lack of interest from policy makers and a traditional culture of secrecy in the Danish police force. The latter is changing albeit slowly, but hopefully Denmark will start reporting data to EMCDDA and with some luck this will spark an interest in policy makers in thinking in cost-benefit terms.

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[1] Rigsadvokaten (2006): Sanktionspåstande mv. i narkotikasager, Meddelelse nr. 6, København.

[2] Kilmer (2003): Cannabis Report 2002.

[3] Sundhedsstyrelsen: Narkotikasituationen i Danmark 2006, SUSY 1994, 2000, 2005.

[4] Retskemisk Institut 2003

[5] Københavns Politis Virksomhedsberetning 2005.

[6] Rigspolitiet: Organiseret Kriminalitet i Danmark 2005.

[7] Reuter and Kleiman (1986)