

Sociodemographic trends in the frequency of cannabis use in Australia

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Introduction: Previous research examining the 2001-2013 National Drug Strategy Household Surveys (NDSHS) found that frequent cannabis use declined among higher socioeconomic groups while remaining stable among lower socioeconomic groups. This study updates these analyses to determine whether these disparities persisted during 2016-2023, a period of policy and societal attitudes changes.

Methods: Data were from the NDSHS conducted in 2016 (N=23,749), 2019 (N=22,015), and 2022-2023 (N=21,663). Multinomial regression models with interaction terms were used to assess associations between past 12 months cannabis use frequency, year, and sociodemographic factors. Multiple imputation addressed missing data.

Results: Daily cannabis use in Australia increased from 1.4% in 2016 to 2.2% in 2022/23, while weekly and less frequent use remained stable. Significant sociodemographic disparities were observed, with higher odds of cannabis use among males, young adults, people in outer regional/rural areas, unpartnered individuals, the unemployed, those with lower education, and those from more disadvantaged areas. Significant year-by-age and year-by-SEIFA interactions suggested a weakening association between younger age and cannabis use frequency, and reduced socioeconomic differences in occasional cannabis use over time.

Discussions and Conclusions: The increase in daily cannabis use across all groups warrants attention, as daily use is associated with higher risks of dependence and adverse health outcomes. Unlike the 2001-2013 period, where declines in use were concentrated among higher socioeconomic groups, the current findings show increases in daily use across the population, with persistent sociodemographic disparities. These trends may reflect changing perceptions of harm and increased access through medical cannabis legalization.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Public health approaches are needed to prevent risks of high-frequency cannabis use, especially daily use. Prevention efforts should target high-risk groups while addressing the increasing normalization of cannabis use across all demographic groups.

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