

UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 12:01 a.m. PDT, December 22, 2011

**Expert audit of government data
proves failure of cannabis prohibition**

B.C.'s top public health doctors join call for ending marijuana prohibition

Polling results show most British Columbians believe alcohol more harmful than cannabis

December 22, 2011 [Vancouver, Canada] – Following Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent rejection of marijuana law reform, Stop the Violence BC has released a new report that audits government funded surveillance systems and concludes that increased funding for anti-marijuana law enforcement does not meet its objectives of decreasing marijuana supply, potency, or cannabis use.

Coinciding with the report's release, the Health Officers' Council of BC (HOC), a registered society in British Columbia of public health physicians who advise and advocate for public policies and programs directed to improving the health of populations, has unanimously passed a resolution to support Stop the Violence BC. This follows the HOC's release of their own report last month calling for the public health-oriented regulation of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances to better reduce the harms that result both from substance use and the unintended consequences of government policies.

Stop the Violence BC's new report, entitled *How not to protect community health and safety: What the government's own data say about the effects of cannabis prohibition*, advocates for a strict regulatory framework and public health approach to legal cannabis sales, using 20 years of data collected by surveillance systems funded by the Canadian and U.S. governments to highlight the failure of cannabis prohibition in North America.

"If you look at the data that governments themselves have collected, it is clear beyond a reasonable doubt that marijuana prohibition has failed to achieve its intended objectives and has actually contributed to a range of serious unintended consequences in terms of organized crime and gang violence," said Dr. Evan Wood, a physician and founder of Stop the Violence BC.

Added Dr. John Carsley, a medical health officer based in Vancouver: "From a scientific and public health perspective, we urgently need to pursue alternatives to the blanket prohibition of marijuana which are based on evidence. Strict regulation, guided by a public health framework, is clearly the logical way forward."

Despite dramatically increased law enforcement funding and mandatory minimum sentences for cannabis offenses, U.S. government data demonstrates that cannabis prohibition has not resulted in a decrease in cannabis availability or accessibility. According to the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, federal anti-drug expenditures in the U.S. increased 600% from \$1.5 billion in 1981 to over \$18 billion in 2002. However, during this same period, the potency of cannabis actually increased by 145% and the price of cannabis decreased by a dramatic 58%.

While not all of the US anti-drug budget-funded programs are specific to the enforcement of cannabis prohibition, increased funding for anti-drug initiatives coincided with a 160% increase in cannabis-related arrests and a 420% increase in cannabis-related seizures between 1990 and 2009. Similarly, Canada has seen a 70% increase in the annual number of cannabis arrests, from roughly 39,000 in 1990 to more than 65,000 in 2009.

However, the increase in enforcement expenditures and arrests is not keeping marijuana out of the hands of teenagers and young adults in British Columbia. The 2009 Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey reported that 27% of youth in B.C. aged 15-24 used cannabis at least once in the previous year, while data collected by the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey demonstrate that annual cannabis use among Ontario high school students has doubled since the early 1990s, from under 10% in 1991 to over 20% in 2009.

“The unmistakable interpretation of government surveillance data is that increased funding for anti-cannabis law enforcement does increase cannabis seizures and arrests, but the assumption that this approach reduces cannabis potency, increases price or meaningfully reduces cannabis availability and use is inconsistent with virtually all available data,” concludes the report.

New poll: Most British Columbians disagree that cannabis is more harmful than alcohol

Accompanying the report, Stop the Violence BC released polling data from Angus Reid that demonstrates that the majority of British Columbians:

- disagree that regular marijuana use is more harmful than regular alcohol use (59%)
- disagree with the statement that marijuana is a dangerous and addictive drug (54%)
- do not believe that marijuana is a “gateway” drug that can lead to the use of more dangerous drugs like heroin (51%)

“It is notable that a majority of British Columbians understand that alcohol is in many ways more dangerous than marijuana. At the same time, there are still incorrect beliefs that cannabis is a ‘gateway’ to other dangerous drug consumption,” said Dr. Paul Hasselback, Chair of the Health Officer’s Council of BC and a medical health officer from Vancouver Island. “The Health Officer’s Council and other experts are not saying that marijuana should be legalized and taxed because it is safe. We are saying that proven public health approaches should be used to constrain its use. There is now more danger to the public’s health in perpetuating a market driven by criminal activity.”

A call for response from politicians

“This report should ring alarm bells for political leaders who have been unwilling to acknowledge what the vast majority of British Columbians already understand – cannabis prohibition is a costly failure,” said Dr. Thomas Kerr, a coalition member and Director of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and St. Paul’s Hospital. “With ongoing gang warfare over massive profits from the illegal cannabis trade and government data clearly showing the easy availability of cannabis despite decades of prohibition, our elected officials must revisit prohibition and tell us what they plan to do to decrease gang violence and protect the health of young British Columbians.”

With the launch of their new report, Stop the Violence BC wants politicians at all levels of government to address the following questions when it comes to B.C.'s marijuana trade:

1. Do you acknowledge the causal link between cannabis prohibition and the growth of organized crime and gang violence? If yes, what do you propose to do about it, especially in light of the evidence showing that the mandatory minimum sentences being considered for Canada have proven to be extremely costly and ineffective in the U.S.?
2. Do you support the Health Officer's Council of BC's recommendation that the province examine ways that adult marijuana use be legally regulated under a public health framework that can shift profit from organized crime groups to tax revenue for governments?
3. Do you believe that marijuana prohibition is effectively reducing the availability of cannabis? Research demonstrates that cannabis is more available to young people than alcohol and tobacco – what do you propose and intend to do about it?

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About Stop the Violence BC

Stop the Violence BC is a coalition of law enforcement officials, legal experts, public health officials and academic experts from the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, and the University of Northern BC. Coalition members have come together to engage all British Columbians in a discussion aimed at developing and implementing marijuana-related policies that improve public health while reducing social harms, including violent crime.

For a full listing of coalition members and to learn more about the coalition, please visit www.stoptheviolencebc.org/about-us/

For quotes from coalition members, photos and links to downloadable videos of coalition members speaking about the report, please visit www.stoptheviolence.org/coalition-members/

About the Health Officer's Council of British Columbia

The Health Officers Council (HOC) of BC is a registered society in British Columbia of public health physicians who, among other activities, advise and advocate for public policies and programs directed to improving the health of populations. The HOC provides recommendations to and works with a wide range of government and non-government agencies, both in and outside of BC.

Physicians involved in HOC include medical health officers in BC and the Yukon, physicians at the BC Centre for Disease Control, Ministry of Health, First Nations and Inuit Health and university departments as well as private consultants. The HOC is independent from these organizations and as such positions taken by HOC do not necessarily represent positions of the organization for which the members work.

About Angus Reid Public Opinion

Angus Reid Public Opinion is the Public Affairs practice of Vision Critical headed by Dr. Angus Reid: an industry visionary who has spent more than four decades asking questions to figure out what people feel, how they think and who they will vote for.

Media: To receive polling results and talk to Medical Health Officers, or members of the Stop the Violence BC Coalition, please contact:

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