

# NAHRPP COUNTRY REPORT

## BELGIUM

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- [General description](#)

- [Research period](#)

The interviews were conducted between December 2017 and April 2018.

- [Description of the sample](#)

Initially, sixteen interviews were conducted. Because two participants were found not to meet the criteria of using cannabis for at least ten years, two extra persons were added to the sample. The persons included in the analysis meet the criteria of being at least 18 years of age and using cannabis for at least ten years. Although Belgium consists of three language communities, all interviews were conducted in Dutch and with persons living in the Dutch language community.

*Gender and age*

A majority of the persons who participated in this study are male (N=12). In terms of age, the respondents are relatively evenly divided. The age of the respondents varied from 27 to 74 years. Three participants were younger than 30 years, four persons were aged between 30 and 40 years, and four persons between 40 and 50 years. Three persons were older than 50 and younger than 60 years. The two oldest persons can be categorized in the group between 60 and 70 years and 70 and 80 years.

*Lifetime use*

The most experienced cannabis consumer used for 36 years, while the person with the less experience first tried cannabis around 10 years before the interview was conducted. The oldest respondents are not necessarily the most experienced users. However, the respondent who used the least time was also the youngest person. Most of the participants (N=7) used between 20 and 30 years.

*Non-members and members of Cannabis Social Clubs*

Eight of the participants are member of a Cannabis Social Club, while the other eight are non-members. However, one of the participants had been a member of a social club in the past. For this study, this participant is categorized as a non-member. All persons who participated in this study as a member of a Cannabis Social Club are members of the same club.

*Occupation*

A minority of the participants state that they did not had a job at the moment that the interview was conducted (N=4). Three of them argued that they were unable to work due to medical reasons. Of note is that a large group of participants indicated they are currently self-employed (N= 5). Other professions mentioned are: policymaker, orthopedist, programmer, biochemist and automation engineer. One person was a freelance worker.

*Relation*

In the total sample, two respondents indicated that they were not in a relationship at the time that the interviews were conducted.



### Education

The sample consists of a group of people who had been in formal education for a relatively long time. None of the participants stated that they had been educated for less than fourteen years. Just a small majority (N=9) did go to school for less than eighteen years. Some indicated that they stopped their study early.

### Current use

All respondents indicated that they use cannabis regularly. Three quarters of the respondents (N=12) indicated that they use cannabis on a daily basis. Just one of the participants stated he consumes cannabis less than once a week.

- ### Recruitment method

The participants for this research study have been recruited through purposive snowball sampling. However, in order to find and reach members of a cannabis social club, a cannabis social club in Belgium was asked to find willing members. The individual cannabis users have been found with snowball sampling.

- ### Analysis Report

In this chapter the Belgian country analysis will be discussed, based on the interviews conducted with sixteen cannabis users. Although all participants have in common the fact that they are cannabis consumers, it can be expected that patterns of use differ over time. In order to help respondents reproduce their story of cannabis use, they were asked to visualize their intensity of use on a timeline (blue line). In paragraph 2.1 the patterns of cannabis use of the participants will be discussed in general. The main focus will be on the higher and lower peaks on the timeline, consistencies in use and periods of abstinence. In paragraph 2.2 the critical points of change will be described. The persons and events referred to as influential regarding the pattern of use by the participants will be discussed here. The strategies that the participants use to maintain, recover, or reinforce control are explained in paragraph 2.3, followed by a description of the informal rules that the participants use to self-regulate their consumption in paragraph 2.4. The last paragraph of the chapter discusses the user's perception on control.

- ### Trajectories and models of use

The given timelines show a variety of forms. A first general observation is that none of the respondents reflect the intensity of use in a completely flat line. Although some lines suggest a rather consistent pattern of use (see: 4BmCSCTL, 7BmCSCTL and 6ITfIndTL), many fluctuations are visible on the other timelines. The fluctuations are characterized by high and low peaks. Flat horizontal lines suggest a consistent pattern of use.

### Initiation of cannabis use

A majority of the users in our sample indicated that they were initiated to cannabis during their teenage years. For two respondents, the moment of first use emerged after the age of fifty years. In all cases, the intensity of use was relatively low when the participants started using cannabis. Respondents who started using during their teenage years argued that they were initiated by their friends. Most participants indicated that they mainly used together with friends. Almost all respondents indicated that they started using cannabis on a regular basis within a few years after their first consumption.

*Let's say we were sitting outside on a square. That used to be the case... a square.  
And that is where it actually started [...] And then again in a group and let something  
pass by and yes that was fun. (6BmCSC)*

The participants who started using at a later age indicated that they started using for medical reasons. These users argued that they started using on a regular basis immediately, as they noticed that their physical complaints were disappearing.

*But then, on the advice of a number of young people who said to me "yes, that's something for you. Just try it". And they then have initiated me that evening and then I felt "oh yes, effectively that pain is going away". And then I continued to use that.(5BmCSC)*

### Experimenting

A majority of the participants stated that the intensity of use steadily grew after they first tried cannabis. Some respondents referred to this phase as a period of experimenting with cannabis. A few participants argued that they then also started testing other drugs. For a majority of the users in our sample, this period is closely related to contextual factors and emerging life changes. The transition of becoming an adult coincides with leaving the parental home, going to high school, partying, starting to earn money, getting more mobile (e.g. getting your driving license), and an increased experience of freedom. Most participants indicated that these elements together contributed to a higher level of consumption.

*I stopped studying and moved to Antwerp. And I'm euh... I only travelled euhm... over the past ten years, and partied, and occasionally did some temporary work, which was actually accompanied by a lot of cannabis use. (1Bflnd)*

*But that is also one of the reasons why the use has increased. From the moment that I actually had my own apartment for the first time, then the moderation was gone actually ... I could smoke at home I did not have to put it away. (2BmCSC)*

Generally, the participants indicated that they were not yet concerned about the origin and quality of the cannabis during the first period of use. This is compounded by the fact that for most respondents it was hard to purchase their own cannabis, since they were still quite young and under parental supervision, had little money to spend, and had limited possibilities to travel to a dealer or a Dutch *coffee shop*.

### Transition to individual use

Almost all respondents argued that cannabis consumption during their first period of use solely occurred together with others. One of the participants stated that it was unthinkable to smoke a joint alone back then.

*I: Back to the beginning of that period. You said 'I used it mainly with friends'. Did you also use it alone?*

*R: Not then. That was even unthinkable at the time. If they found out, then you were doing the wrong thing. [...] You just couldn't do that. Because then you were just like an addict. That wasn't possible, smoking a joint on your own. That had to be done together.(6BmCSC)*

Although none of the respondents referred to a specific event or person that made them consume alone, almost all respondents indicated that they used alone when they reached their first peak.

### Experimenting with other drugs

Some participants indicated that their cannabis consumption in the first phase of use coincided with experimenting with other drugs. In contrast with cannabis, most respondents argued that their use of other drugs occurred rather occasionally and in particular moments. In addition, the use of other drugs often had already stopped or occurred to a much lesser degree.

*I have also been partying in my early years and then we also used other drugs to go*

*out. That's been years ago now and I'm not missing it a bit. Not that I dislike it, I'm not against it either, but it's not that I "Oooh, you remember those good old times? That is what I want to see now". I do not have that at all.*

In order to purchase cannabis, the participants referred to different channels. Especially in the first period of use, friends were the most common distribution channel. For a small group of participants this is still the case.

### *Purchasing cannabis*

As Belgium is geographically located close to the Netherlands, a majority of the cannabis users in our sample stated that they had ever purchased cannabis in Dutch *coffee shops*. During the interviews, some participants indicated that easy accessibility of *coffee shops* led to an increase in their consumption.

*Then it was actually... Yes... In fact, that was carte blanche, he. Yeah, well, it cost quite a bit of money. Let us not deny that either, but I also did some jobs on the side, just weekend work. So, yes, I was willing to do that (2BfInd)*

*When I was in the army [...] I was in Germany, so I always passed in the Netherlands. So from then on I had a fixed stock always, and smoking occurred on a more regular basis. (1BfInd)*

In 2012, the Netherlands introduced the residence criterion. From that moment, it became more difficult for foreign people to obtain cannabis via Dutch *coffee shops*. Although it did not prevent the participants from using cannabis, it made them find other channels to purchase cannabis. For some cannabis members, this was the moment that they came in contact with a cannabis social club.

### *High peaks*

The peaks on a timeline illustrate the high levels of consumption. For some participants, a peak is followed by a decrease of use (e.g. 1BfIndTL, 2BfIndTL, 6BmCSCTL), while for others cannabis consumption stabilized (e.g. 2BmCSCTL, 3BmCSCTL, 4BmCSCTL).

In general a differentiation can be made between peaks in the first part of the timelines and later peaks. For most participants, the first peak followed after a period in which the level of consumption was closely related to the life stage at that moment and the social context. Later peaks have been mostly referred to as high levels of consumption as a result of some particular experiences and events. According to the participants, these events are often initiated by negative experiences, like the loss of a friend, a broken relationship, or becoming unemployed, or a police intervention.

Some participants who indicated that they use because of medical issues, argued that their use also depends on the complaints they perceive. One of the respondents for example indicated that cannabis consumption increased significantly, after the respondent had decided to replace the prescription medication for cannabis.

*I stopped taking ordinary medication altogether. Slowly completely switched to cannabis, so my use has increased enormously.(5BfInd)*

### *Low peaks*

Some drawings show a descending line at a certain moment on the timeline (e.g. 3ITfIndTL, 4BfIndTL, 6BmCSCTL). These low peaks can be caused by a range of elements. Amongst others, these elements can be increased physical issues, relational problems, police interventions, or intended

decisions to lower the intensity of use for a moment.

*Until I start growing myself, somewhere in the years 2005, 2006. And then that went up a bit, because there is not .... with one time a fall. Because I once had the police and they took away all my plants. And then I had to buy everything again and so on. (3BfInd)*

### Consistent line

A consistent pattern of use is represented on the timeline as a flat horizontal line. Most participants indicated that their consumption stabilized at a certain moment during their lifetime use. According to some participants, a stable pattern of use coincides with a balanced life stage. In general, these phases are characterized by a stable working and home situation and no problematic health issues. The cannabis consumption has become habitual in their life.

*Euhm... so it really helps me fall asleep. Plus, I find it a very nice ritual that says 'okay, my working day is over, it's now.... Now I don't have to worry about anything anymore' and then it's time to smoke. It is almost a ritual. (7BmCSC)*

*Then I started with cannabis again. And yes, for the medicinal use so it has actually remained stable. (1BmCSC).*

Some participants made a comparison with other licit drugs to emphasise that they perceive their cannabis consumption as a habit, as for alcohol.

*Yes, just as someone is going to open his bottle of wine at the weekend. But I have not drunk any wine since I was 15 years old. I do not drink alcohol. (4BmCSC)*

A majority of the participants even state that they perceive alcohol as more dangerous for health than cannabis.

*Yes, I think alcohol is a very dangerous substance. You can feel that the grip is completely different from cannabis. (4BfInd)*

### Periods of abstinence

A minority of the users in our sample indicated that they had stopped using cannabis after a period of time. Although the participants referred to a range of reasons, none suggested that they had asked for professional help. In general a differentiation can be made between short periods of abstinence and longer periods of abstinence. In this case, a distinction is made between both periods of abstinence, because only the longer periods are indicated on the timelines.

#### *Short period of abstinence*

The participants who indicated that they had stopped using for a short period of time, argued that it most often had to do with a trip to another country. Some of the reasons for the participants to stop using cannabis for a short period are because they fear being caught at the border, or because they want to avoid a confrontation with foreign authorities. None of them argued that they perceived difficulties during the period that they did not use cannabis. The respondents mainly argued that the environment made them think about other things than using cannabis, or the problems they normally perceive when they do not use.

*Even now, during the holidays, I don't take my cannabis with me.[...] I do not want to discuss with the French, or the Germans, or the Spaniards. If they find that in my car, then you're nowhere. Maybe I go for fourteen days or three weeks without cannabis, with the necessary consequence that I sometimes feel bad for three days. [...] I don't care about that. I am on holiday. You don't pay attention to it. You are busy with other things. That's all right, it's a bit suppressed by the activities you've got then.(4BmCSC)*

Other reasons to stop using for a short time are mainly related to personal problems. Some of the participants indicated that they made the decision to stop, because they hoped it would help them to better cope with a situation.

*During that career, I had two or three moments that I wasn't using cannabis. Euhm... A first time when my ex-wife was about to leave me. Then I wanted to be sure I was thinking clearly. That I would not make stupid decisions in my life under the influence of cannabis.*

*Interviewer: Have you ever stopped for a period of time?*

*Respondent: Yes. In fact, these peaks can sometimes go all the way down to the bottom. But never to stop completely. More to get back to the feeling that everything is okay, and then start using again.(3BfInd)*

#### *Long period of abstinence*

A few participants reported abstinence for a longer period (see: 2BfIndTL, 1BmCSCTL, 3BmCSCTL, 5ITfIndTL). The shortest period that was referred to was one and a half months, while the longest lasted longer than four years. All participants who indicated that they stopped using cannabis for a certain period of time, argued that they stopped resolutely. This is also visible in the timelines of the respondents, which show a sudden drop in the intensity of use.

The arguments to which the users referred were closely related to the respondent's physical and psychological problems. Of the participants who decided to stop using cannabis for a longer period, one of the users argued that it was directly related to the effects of cannabis consumption. This participant decided to quit using cannabis after experiencing several panic attacks. For one person, the period of abstinence was triggered by a police intervention. The other elements will be discussed in more detail in paragraph 2.3, as a topic regarding turning points.

#### *Consistent use*

Some timelines show a relative consistent intensity of use. In this case, participants often argued that a consistent line coincides with a balanced life and a 'normalized' pattern of use. Sometimes the comparison was made with other mostly legal substances.

*Yes, just as someone is going to open his bottle of wine at the weekend. But I have not drunk any wine since I was 15 years old. I do not drink alcohol. (4BmCSC)*

#### *Positive effects*

In general, participants emphasized the positive effects of cannabis. According to a majority, cannabis somehow adds something positive to their lives. The most common reference was to the soothing effect of cannabis. It helps the participants to calm down. Related to that, the users in our sample argue that it helps to deal with stressful situations, to better focus, or to empty the head.

Among the respondents, cannabis is also used to stimulate the senses. Some persons indicated that they use cannabis, because it increases appetite or because it made music sounds a little better.

*My senses were a bit sharper when I had smoked, or euh... So I had the... Yes, I had the ritual to roll a joint, listen to music and then go to sleep.(6BfIInd)*

### Medicinal use

Almost all of the participants indicate that they always used it for recreational reasons and that they still perceive the given effect as a positive element of the cannabis. Nevertheless, some of the respondents indicated that they consume cannabis primarily for medical reasons in order to combat or alleviate physical or psychological symptoms. Some participants argued that their intensity of use is influenced by their medical issues. One of the respondents for example stated that consumption increased when he started to use it as a substitute for prescribed medicines.

*I stopped taking ordinary prescribed medicine altogether. Slowly completely switched to cannabis, so my use has increased enormously.(5BfIInd)*

## 2.2 Turning points

As the timelines suggest, pattern of use sometimes change at a certain moment. During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe which elements are related to these changes in their consumption pattern. Flat horizontal lines often suggest a stable pattern of use. However, most timelines show a fluctuating pattern. This section discusses the turning point in the patterns of use. Turning points can be described as elements that made participants decide to change the intensity of use. These elements can consist of persons or events, or a mix of events and persons.

### Reasons for changing the pattern of use

The participants reported several reasons for changing their patterns of use. Some indicated that their pattern changed as a result of a range of elements, while others argued that a specific experience or action had made them decide to adapt their pattern of use.

### Influencing events

Some specific experiences were mentioned as important in the change of the trajectory.

#### *Difficult life events*

Whereas the first peak period is mainly related to other changes in the course of life, some indicated that their pattern of use was influenced by specific events. One of the respondents said that the death of a good friend had resulted in period in which there was no longer any restriction on the intensity of use.

*I: Here is the moment that your friend died. Was that a moment that you...*

*R: Yes, since then it's actually gone wild.(1BfIInd)*

Some other participants argued that their use increased after experiencing difficulties in their relationship.

*Respondent: There was also a break in the relationship there. And euh... Yes.*

*Interviewer: Which has also had an impact on your use then?*

*Respondent: Yes, yes. I am... Allez, I also went partying a bit more extreme, a bit.*

*(4BfIInd)*

#### *Police intervention*

As cannabis is illegal, it may happen that cannabis consumers will be confronted with police or judicial authorities. In our sample, some users indicated that they had been subject to a police intervention. For

some of them it directly influenced their cannabis consumption. One respondent indicated that it made him stop using cannabis for a time, because of fear of new interventions.

*And then I had a problem with the police again and I stopped about two months out of fear. (5BfInd)*

#### *Experiencing panic attacks*

A minority of the participants stated that they sometimes perceive negative effects of their cannabis use, like becoming drowsy, frightened, or getting panic attacks. Nevertheless, most of the respondents argued that these experiences did not have an impact on their pattern of use. One of the participants indicated that he had decided to stop using cannabis, after he had suffered panic attacks.

*At one point, that [the panic attacks] was really daily. More than daily. And... euh... it really had an impact on me. I noticed it was too much. It really isn't anymore... That was indeed not the healthy way. Then I did indeed have panic attacks, yes. And if I did that [smoking cannabis] again, I got it again. And then I began to realize "yeah, actually that's not so much fun anymore, if you have to continue doing it that way" (2BfInd)*

#### *Influencing persons*

Influencing persons can either be informal and formal actors. During the interviews, the participants referred to a range of these persons.

#### *The influence of the informal network*

In the first period of use especially, friends play a significant role in the initiation to cannabis consumption. According to a majority of the participants, they started using in the context of friendships.

*That is uh ... yes, the cliché. So basically with friends, and one of the friends then has some weed, and that's how it starts. (2BfInd)*

A few participants indicated that they started thinking about changing their pattern of use, at the moment that people close to them stopped using cannabis.

*Maybe I do that period... There has also been a period when a lot of people around me have started to stop. That I also thought about reducing and stopping but then it starts back anyway and then reduces back. (6BmCSC)*

Also the partner of the respondent seems to have an impact on the pattern of use. As mentioned above, partners can have an indirect effect in the case of a relational crisis or divorce. Besides these kind of events, also the attitude of the partner can influence the pattern of use, according to some of the participants.

*Yes, now it's less, because, yes, I've now started living together with my girlfriend. Euhm.... She does not fully support it. She allows me to do so, but she does not fully support it. (2BfInd)*

#### *Formal actors*

During the interviews, some formal actors have been mentioned by the participants. The most common mentioned actors were general practitioners, specialists, police officers and magistrates.

General practitioners are mostly mentioned by the medicinal users. The participants indicated that they

openly communicate about their cannabis use with their doctor. One of the participants indicated that using cannabis was initiated by a practitioner. In all other cases, they were not mentioned as a group of people who had a significant impact on their pattern of use.

Police officers and judges were sometimes mentioned by the participants, but the main impact arose from the police intervention.

### Mix of influencing elements

As described in the former paragraph, the first phase was often represented as an ascending line in the timeline, ending with a peak. This peak was often referred to as a point of change. For most participants, the first turning point was closely related to transitions in the context in which they started using cannabis, such as: leaving school and start working, less interested in partying, close relatives who stop using cannabis and getting settled. This transitional period is accompanied by an increase in awareness of their own use.

*I was overly tired of partying. I also got a bit older. Maybe time to do something decent. A little bit done with partying actually. I have tested it all very thoroughly. I was able to do everything I wanted to test in decent quantities. Euhm... but then, I was a little bit done with it. (1Bflnd)*

*There has also been a period when a lot of people around me have started to stop, that I also thought of reducing and stopping, yeah... (6BmCSC)*

## 2.3 Personal strategies

In order to maintain a controlled pattern of use, people used certain personal strategies. During the interviews the participants referred to a range of these strategies to maintain a controlled pattern of use or gain back control. In this paragraph the personal strategies of the participants will be discussed.

### *It needs to stay fun*

Most participants argued that they primarily use cannabis because of pleasure and the enjoyable effect. Therefore, they mentioned that their main objective is to keep the use pleasant.

*It must remain pleasant. It has to be fun. Does not start to affect your body  
[...]*

*And it must not harm your mental health. No. It must... (silence). Euh... How should I put it. It must remain nice huh. That's always a bit my... I have had that in my mind for thirty years. (1Bflnd)*

In general, the participants are well aware of the level of cannabis they consume during a certain period. Most of them indicate that they stop using after they have reached the desired effect, or when they feel that they have had enough. Some respondents indicated that they stop using when they feel it is enough.

*But you have those people, you open a pack of chips, it's (hits the table) empty within two minutes, euh... That white chocolate is all the way up. It is in it, or it is not in it. And... I have enough after one cookie and after one piece of chocolate I have enough and after one joint I have enough. (7BmCSC)*

### Fulfil societal duties

Some participants referred to elements closely related to the structure and activity of society. They indicated that they aim to keep on doing their societal duties and carrying out their work to the best of their ability.

### Structured life pattern

Some of the participants argued that it is important to have a stable and structured life in order to maintain control. One of the respondents argued that the minimal structure of life made her set rules. By adapting these rules, she indicated that she managed to keep a controlled pattern of use.

*But I always have... Throughout all these years I have worked. So it was out of the question to smoke the day before, it was out of the question to smoke euh... to smoke when I had family affairs or something like that. So d'r has always been a certain structure in my life, so it has always literally remained recreational.(7BmCSC)*

### Having work

Some of the participants referred to having a job as an important element to maintain a controlled pattern of use. According to them, working helps them to stay in the structure of societal daily life.

*I always kept on working, even if it was only interim, but ... I was often out of work for one or two weeks. I also did interim work, ten years, because I didn't want to do any permanent work. That was most definitive of all to me. Euhm... But I have never put my unemployment benefit papers in order.(1Bflnd)*

### Purchasing channels

Cannabis can be purchased through different channels. However, participants showed some resistance against points of sale where the production process lacks transparency and where the cannabis is not screened. Therefore, respondents try to avoid contaminated and very strong cannabis, by looking for more transparent and less harmful solutions.

### You smoke what you grow

During the interview almost all respondents indicated that they have some experience with growing cannabis at home. A few argued that they have tried this in the past, but that they stopped at the moment. However, the majority indicated that they are still cultivating themselves. Besides economic reasons, some respondents indicated that self-cultivation keeps them in control of the quality of the cannabis they will consume.

*And I'm working on that, in the sense that I'm trying to take care of it. Also because it is a kind of honesty. You smoke what you eat. Allez, you smoke what you grow.  
(4Bflnd)*

### Cannabis Social Clubs

Members of a cannabis social club in our sample argued that the cannabis social club offered them the possibility to purchase biological and soft cannabis.

*I loved to know.... look, this is euh... it is not legal, but it happens in a pure way, in an open way, where everything is very clear. You know what kind of weed you are buying, you choose whether it is strong or not, whether it does not contain much THC,*

*etcetera, etcetera.( 7BmCSC)*

*And a cannabis social club that can also help me. Then I also know that this is clean weed. (3BmCSC)*

In addition, some participants argued that their cannabis social club has been supportive in providing information about home-growing and less harmful methods of use, or improving current consumption methods.

*At the [name Social Club] you can learn how to make oil. They will guide you. Yeah, that's super.*

*[...]*

*But I also discuss this with the people at the club, like "How can I do this better?" (5BmCSC)*

The participants indicated that a distinction can be made between different types of cannabis. Depending on the type of cannabis, different effects may occur. The users who participated in the study indicated that they choose a certain type of cannabis depending on the effect they are looking for. Related to this, some of them indicated that the cannabis social club helped them in finding the correct type of cannabis. Especially persons who used cannabis for medical reasons argued that it helped them to limit their cannabis consumption.

### Consumption methods

In order to keep control over their cannabis use, some of the participants state that they try to limit the cannabis they use. Some participants therefore indicated that they try to make a well-considered choice between a joint or vaporizer, cannabis oil, or edibles. Edibles refers to everyday products, like cookies, combined with cannabis extract. Some other participants indicated that they aim to minimize the strength of the cannabis, by dosing.

*Look I still have that vaporizer here. I sometimes use this vaporizer as well, but there is one big disadvantage to it. That vaporizer that is very good to become completely stoned and that's not my intention. Of course I can minimize that too, but not as well as in a cigarette.(4BmCSC)*

### Cannabis as substitute for licit drugs

Some of the participants also indicated that they use cannabis as a strategy to prevent themselves from using other drugs. Most references were made to alcohol and medicines.

### Alcohol consumption

A majority of the participants indicated that they use or did use alcohol. Some participants indicated that their cannabis consumption coincides with a reduction of their alcohol consumption. Although the participants initially did not intend to start consuming cannabis as a substitute for alcohol, the cannabis consumption now prevents them from high level alcohol consumption.

*Rarely or never.... It does happen that I drink a glass of wine and smoke afterwards, but I drink incredibly little. And that may have something to do with my use of*

*marijuana, probably. I think I would probably drink a little more. Euhm... I do not think the two go hand in hand in general.*(5BmCSC)

*Interviewer: Do you notice that you use less alcohol because of cannabis?*

*Respondent: Oh yes, absolutely. I have been using less and less myself for the last ten years.*

*[...]*

*In the past, that was after five beers and after a certain time after two beers, and now after one beer. And in the long run... yeah, it wasn't fun anymore, the use of alcohol. I only get sick from it. So now I've been completely alcohol-free for more than four years. And I think the last five or six years before that, it has been sporadic. At that moment, I already had the disappointing effect. But yes, I blame the cannabis for that. I don't know how that euhm... But my body doesn't want that anymore and I feel no need or desire for that. "Oh, getting drunk again! Drink again!"*(3BfInd)

### *Medication*

Some of the participants reported that they suffer from health issues. A majority of them indicated that they started using cannabis as a substitute for their prescribed medication. For these participants, cannabis has improved their health or softened the pain, without causing the undesirable side effects of medication.

*And at the end of the day just took the medication again, as it had to. And then I had something like 'I didn't feel depressed yesterday, so blowing is actually more pleasant than taking medication'.*(2BmCSC)

*Then I started with cannabis again after about four years. And I have completely reduced those painkillers, so that for almost 5 years now I have been taking nothing.*

*Really nothing.[...] I am very happy now. My quality of life has been improved enormously. I have a life again. (3BmCSC)*

## 2.4 Informal rules

Because of the illegal status of cannabis, there is no official regulation applicable to cannabis consumption. However, this does not mean that users do not apply their own rules in order to self-regulate their cannabis use. This paragraph will discuss the informal rules to which users aim to comply.

### *Rules with regard to using alone*

Some of the participants indicated that they only use cannabis at moments that they perceive as appropriate. As such, some respondents argued that they do not use during the morning or afternoon.

*No, I would never think 'ah, now I'd smoke a joint in the afternoon'. No, that is euh.*(6BfInd)

Some participants indicated that the rule is applicable, because using at other moments of the day would lead to a decrease in productivity. Others emphasised the beneficial side of using cannabis during the evening and argued that it helps them relax and getting to sleep.

*It was time to blow less and do more. Because if you start blowing in the morning...*

*yes, you'll do less. So now it's limited to the evening. (1TfInd)*  
*"When I came home and I had eaten, I took a shower. And then a joint for decent sleep" (1BmCSC)*

A majority of the participants indicated that they had started using cannabis alone, shortly after they were initiated to cannabis. The participants referred to a range of rules that are applicable to their pattern of use.

#### Social versus individual use

Characteristic of the first phase of use is that it occurs mainly in a context together with others. After a relatively short period of using cannabis with others, most participants indicated that the individual use of cannabis became more frequent and for a majority even prevailed. There does not seem to be a direct link between individual consumption and high intensity of use, as most respondents indicate that individual use continues to prevail, even when intensity falls again.

#### Consume in moderation

A few participants indicated that their consumption is somehow limited, as they aim to consume with moderation. Some of them argued that they stop using cannabis when they have reached the desired effect, or when they feel that it has been enough. One of the respondents explained it by stating that intoxication is no objective, like it sometimes is with alcohol.

*Yes, and that shouldn't be until you fall to the ground. Just like with beers, that shouldn't be always the case. There is no need to. Just being cosy together, a talk and a smoking a cigarette. And everybody returns to home to his wife and children and life goes on. (3BmCSC)*

#### Rules with regards to the environment

Some rules apply to the respondent's environment. Some of these rules relate to the personal context, while other rules are particularly applicable to the user's profession.

#### *It's not because I use cannabis that everyone has to do that*

A few participants indicated that they generally do not use it in the presence of others. The rule applies in particular when the respondents are not sure if their guests perceive cannabis use as a problem.

*Yes, at least on the verandah. Or if there are guests, like on a Tupperware evening or so, I don't walk around here either. Then I go into the verandah as well. They know all that, but I go onto the verandah.*

*[...]*

*It's not because I use cannabis that everyone has to do that. (5BfInd)*

#### *Not in front of children*

Some respondents stated that they are extra careful when there are children around. Most of them indicated that they aim to avoid using cannabis close to children. A few persons just do not use when children are close, while some others stated that they try to find a quiet spot.

*Because I do not use in front of my daughter. I use in the kitchen then. (6BmCSC)*

Nevertheless, almost all respondents argued that they want to communicate openly to their kids about their cannabis consumption. Just one of the participants argued that he does not isolate himself when using cannabis. According to this respondent, hiding his cannabis use will not prevent his children from using themselves.

#### *Before or during work*

In general, using cannabis before or during work is not done by the participants. However, some stated that they did not always comply to this rule in the past, especially during periods of high level consumption. Some of these participants indicated that the consumption of cannabis had little negative impact on their profession.

*I also worked a little bit at that time. And I've actually got myself there. Allez, that was the rule "I don't do that during my work or for my work, but then again". So I still had that rule. (2BfInd)*

#### *Using cannabis before or during driving*

Of the participants who mentioned that they do not use cannabis when they need to drive a vehicle, a majority argued that they never used cannabis when they need to drive. A minority indicated that they have no problem with using cannabis when they need to drive.

*No, no, there is no question of that, there is no question of it. No, I never go by car. And in principle I don't try to do it even for long distances. (4BmCSC)*

## 2.5 Perception of control

This paragraph will discuss whether participants perceive control over their consumption pattern. During the interview, the participants have been asked to draw a second (green) line which represents their perception of control. A first general observation is that some of the control lines mirror the line that represents the intensity of use (e.g. 1BfIndTL, 4BfIndTL, 8BmCSCTL), while some other lines mainly stay straight (e.g. 5BmCSCTL, 6BmCSCTL, 7BmCSCTL). A second general observation is that the most participants indicated that their current control is relatively high.

### No control

A few participants stated that they almost lost control once. Losing control was often related to an exuberant or difficult phase of life.

None of the participants labelled some of the periods in their pattern of use as problematic. However, some of them indicate that during their peak period it could have become problematic.

### Perceived low control

The lines of perceived control that mirror the intensity of use suggest that the participants perceive less control when their level of consumption is high. During the interviews, the participants who had indicated that they had perceived a loss of control during a higher intensity of consumption mainly focused on other personal problems as the source of less control.

*Yes, then you could say that you actually have something like that. And then here for*

*a moment. And I think, at the moment it is .... I think it is reasonably under control. But euhm... Yes. It is... I was in a very difficult situation in my life then. (8BmCSC)*

A few other control lines start very low at the beginning of the timeline. These participants argued that they had little to no control over their cannabis use during that period, because there was little thought around it.

*Without any thought actually. I just did. No, that is not really determined from then or then, or so much or this or that No, so... [...] There was little effective thinking around.(BTfInd)*

### Perceived high control

A majority of the participants argued that they feel a high level of control about their use. However, the participants referred to different categories in order to explain their perceived perception of control. First, some participants refer to the level of dependency of cannabis as a criteria for controlled use. Second, some participants argued that it is related to the way cannabis is used in society. Lastly, some respondents referred to indicators that are linked to the moment that cannabis is consumed and the possible negative effects of immoderate consumption.

### No craving

Some the participants argued that they do not miss the cannabis when it is not there. Although most of them indicate that they want to consume it, they do not perceive any kind of craving.

*But if I have nothing then I have absolutely no craving. I have also smoked tobacco, 40 years in a row. I noticed very well the difference between having a shortage of tobacco or having a shortage of weed. (5BmCSC)*

### Fulfil the societal duties

Some other participants argued that their consumption of cannabis is controlled, as they still can fulfil their tasks in the society.

*I have always had that under control. Nothing really went wrong because I was smoking. Or something didn't work because I didn't smoke or did smoke. I do not actually do that. For me, it only had a positive impact in my general life, in my opinion.(3BmCSC)*

### Responsible use

A few participants indicated that they are in control because they have never been involved in excessive consumption. Controlled use is related to moderate consumption, knowing your limits and stopping use when the desirable effect is reached.

*Started thinking about how and why and... Ah yeah, than it came out 'yes, in the evening before I'm going to sleep, effective for the purpose of... Not just... (5BfInd)*

## Observations

The timelines show a wide variety of consumption patterns. Some indicate that their intensity of use is mostly balanced, while some others suggest a fluctuating pattern with extremes of high levels of consumption at the top of the timeline and periods of abstinence at the bottom.

During the interviews, the participants indicated that there are a range of elements that influence the pattern of use. With regards to the first period of use, especially of the users who started in their teenage years, consumption is closely related to the social context of the cannabis user. In general, the intensity of use increases after a short period of initiation. The increase in use coincides with life changes of the consumers, as they become older. The higher and lower peaks in later periods are mainly a consequence of specific events (e.g. police interventions, psychological or physical problems).

In order to get, maintain and recover control, participants use personal strategies and set informal rules. During the research it became clear that a range of strategies and rules are applicable to cannabis consumers who participated in this study. Some of the personal strategies refer to the role of the user in the society. A range of participants aim to stay in control by fulfilling their professional and non-professional duties. The rules that are related to these strategies aim to prevent them from becoming less productive, for example by using cannabis before or during work. Another mentioned strategy relates to the channels for purchasing cannabis. A majority of the consumers argued that they prefer to have quality and less strong cannabis in order to prevent themselves from situations of excessive or harmful use. In order to do so, participants prefer transparent and open entities, like cannabis social clubs, or growing cannabis for themselves. The rules that apply to these strategies aim to reduce the harmful effects of the cannabis. An example is finding ways of dosing cannabis when it is too strong. Lastly, some participants indicated that they use cannabis as a substitute for other substances. In the case of medical users a majority argued that they consciously choose to use cannabis instead of prescribed medication. Some participants also indicated that their cannabis consumption has led to a reduction of their alcohol consumption. However, most participants indicate that they do not purposely consume less alcohol.

Some observations can be made with regards to the lines that represent the perception of control of the participants. Some controlled use lines mirror the line that represents the intensity of use. The participants argue that this is mainly a result of other social issues, also influencing the intensity of use and the perception of control. The other controlled lines however show a flat horizontal or increasing trend. The participants who constantly perceive high levels of control mainly refer to the fact that they had no experience with excessive consumption, and that they have always felt that they can stop using whenever they want. The participants who perceived low control at the beginning of their use argued that it was hard to have some control during that period, because there were no thoughts about it at that moment.

Although negative effects of cannabis were mentioned during the interviews, most participants emphasized the beneficial impact of cannabis. All respondents said that they deliberately choose to use cannabis and they have never felt that they fully lost control. Some indicated that they want to stop using cannabis in the long run, but that at the moment the benefits of stopping do not outweigh the benefits of using it. Only a few participants referred to their cannabis consumption as an addiction. In a number of situations, in particular the use of tobacco is perceived as problematic and is considered undesirable.

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