

4/20 Friendly? Canadian support for pot legalization grows, but most don't view it as a national priority

Divisions exist over whether legalization should also erase previous criminal records for possession

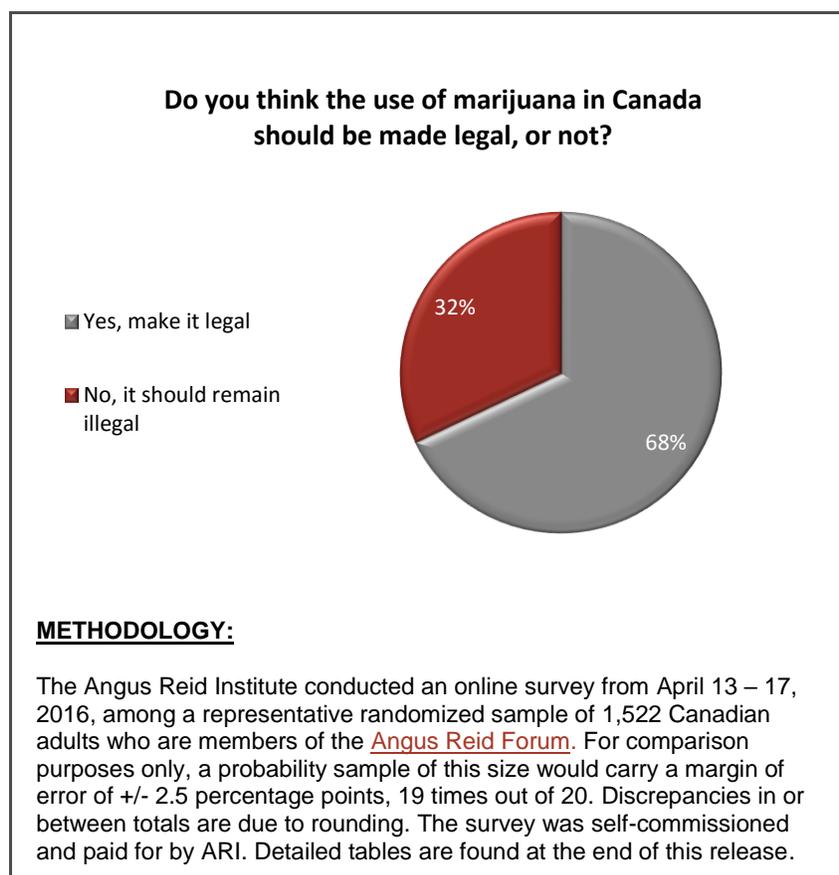
April 20, 2016 – As the federal government prepares to end a 90-plus-year prohibition on pot, a new poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds Canadians more comfortable than ever with such a move, but disinclined to see a pressing need for change.

Overall, nearly seven-in-ten Canadians say marijuana should be legal, but there are significant differences in opinion on what legalization should look like. Should Canadians be able to grow their own plants? Will legalization make it easier for children to use the drug? And what should happen to people who have been convicted of marijuana-related offences under the current legal regime?

Beyond this – more than half don't see it as a critical issue on the national agenda.

Key Findings:

- More than two-in-three Canadians (68%) say marijuana should be made legal, and roughly the same number (64%) say legalization will do more good than harm in the long run
- Legalization does not exactly top the list of national priorities – more than half (54%) of Canadians see it as one of the least important issues facing the country today
- Canadians are apprehensive about making the drug too readily available, however. A plurality (41%) say it should be “legalized, but tightly controlled by government”



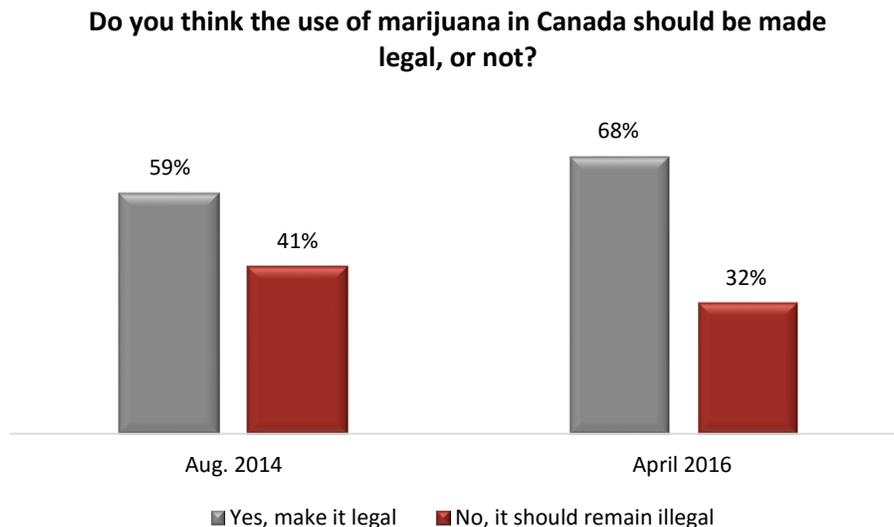
PART 1: Widespread support for legalization

Nearly seven-in-ten support legalizing marijuana

Marijuana has been outlawed in Canada since 1923, when moral panic – [and a fair bit of racism](#) – led it to be classified alongside opium and other narcotics.

Since then, government commissions have twice recommended ending the prohibition – [first in the 1970s](#), and [again in 2002](#) – but their findings have gone unimplemented in the face of public opinion that, [until relatively recently](#), tilted against legalization.

Today, when asked to choose between legalizing marijuana and maintaining the ban on recreational use, nearly seven-in-ten (68%) say “make it legal.” This represents a nine-point increase compared to [a 2014 Angus Reid survey](#) that asked the same question:

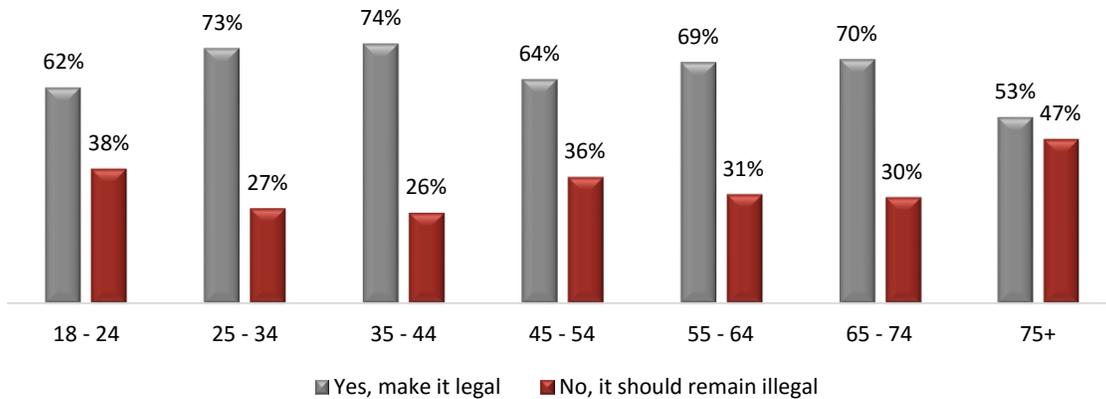


This growth in support for legalization is reflected in the fact that those in the “make it legal” camp are more likely to say they’ve changed their minds on the issue (39% say they’ve done so, compared to 15% of those who say marijuana should remain illegal). This finding – that supporters of legalization have grown into that view over time – mirrors [what Pew Research found](#) in the United States in 2014.

Notably, there doesn’t appear to be much of a generation gap on this issue. Those aged 18 – 34 are just as likely to say marijuana should be made legal as those 55 and older (68% versus 67%, respectively), and those in between are also broadly supportive of legalization (69%).

There is some difference at the extreme ends of the age scale, however, with respondents aged 75 and older much more evenly split between saying “make it legal” (53%) and saying it should remain illegal (47%, see summary tables at the end of this release for greater detail):

Do you think the use of marijuana in Canada should be made legal, or not?

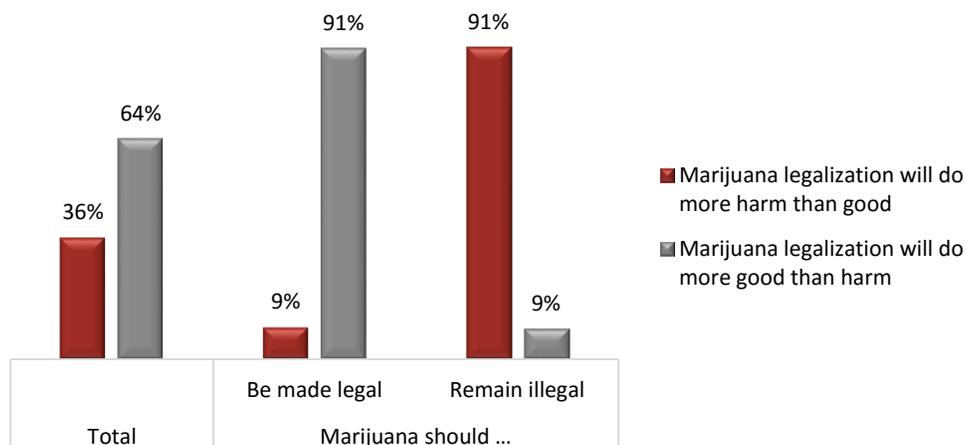


Canadians say legalization will do more good than harm

If there's a bright line dividing supporters and opponents of marijuana legalization, it's the question of whether such a change will ultimately do more good or more harm.

Overall, two-thirds of Canadians (64%) say legalization will do more good than harm, while 36 per cent take the opposite view. As seen in the following graph, however, the pro- and anti-pot camps are diametrically opposed on this question:

All things considered, which of the following broad statements about marijuana legalization is closer to your own opinion?

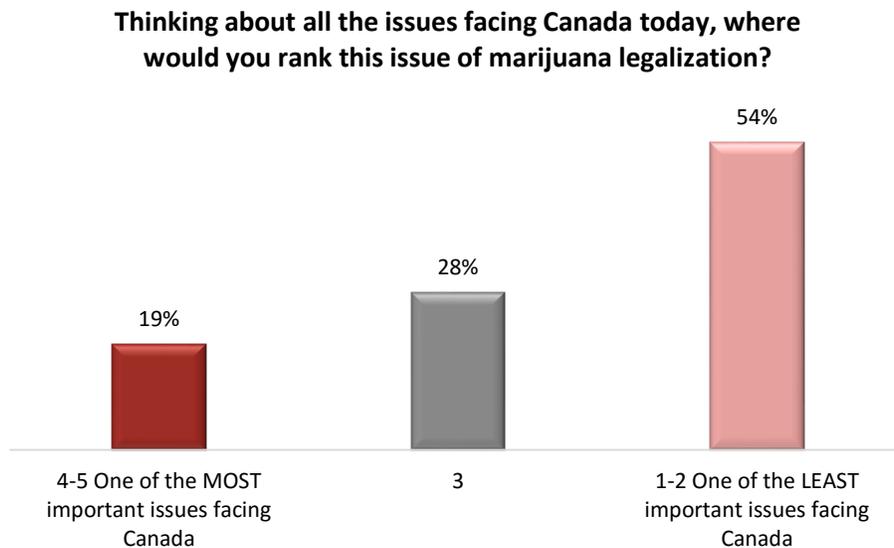


But how important is this issue?

The federal government [has not set a deadline](#) for when it will introduce marijuana legislation, an approach that stands in contrast to the speed with which it enacted some of the other items on its agenda, including [Syrian refugee resettlement](#) and a [“middle class” tax cut](#).

If government is putting a lower priority on marijuana legalization, it may well reflect the public’s perception that this issue is not among the most pressing.

Asked to rank the importance of legalizing pot on a one-to-five scale, with a 5 meaning it’s “one of the most important issues facing Canada” and a 1 meaning it’s “one of the least important issues,” the largest number of Canadians (30%) choose a 1, and a full majority (54%) locate themselves at either a 1 or a 2. This is more than double the number who choose a 4 or a 5, as seen in the following graph:



For comparison, consider that a recent ARI poll on [the rising cost of food](#) found most Canadians (53%) ranked that issue as a 4 or a 5, and only one-in-ten (11%) said it was a 1 or a 2.

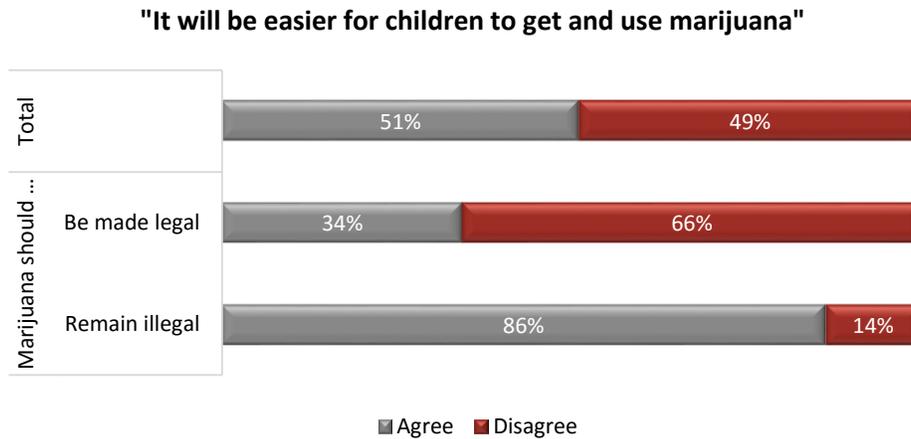
PART 2: Significant gulf between supporters and opponents

Disagreement on key effects of legalization

Roughly half of all Canadians (51%) agree that if pot is legalized, “it will be easier for children to get and use marijuana,” a consequence [experts say would be detrimental](#) to young, still-developing brains.

But will legalization actually make it easier for children to get their hands on the drug? Canadians’ answers to that question largely depend on their opinion on legalizing pot in the first place. Those who

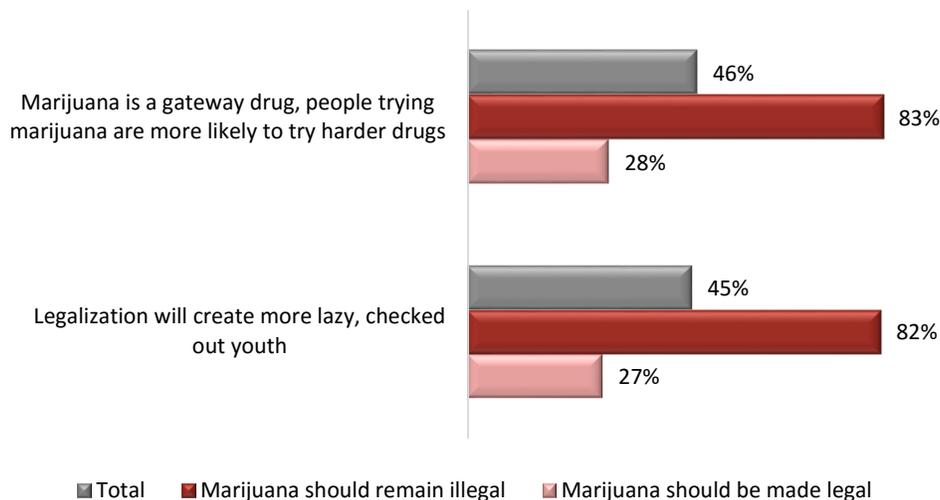
say it should remain illegal overwhelmingly agree with the statement, while those who say “make it legal” are almost as likely to *disagree*:



This is one of a few key potential consequences of legalization on which supporters and opponents have drastically differing opinions.

As seen in the graph that follows, the two camps’ perspectives are also wildly divergent on whether marijuana is a “gateway drug” that leads users to try other, more harmful substances, and on whether legalization will lead to greater apathy among youth:

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements (those saying 'agree' shown):



Canadians divided on clearing possession from criminal records

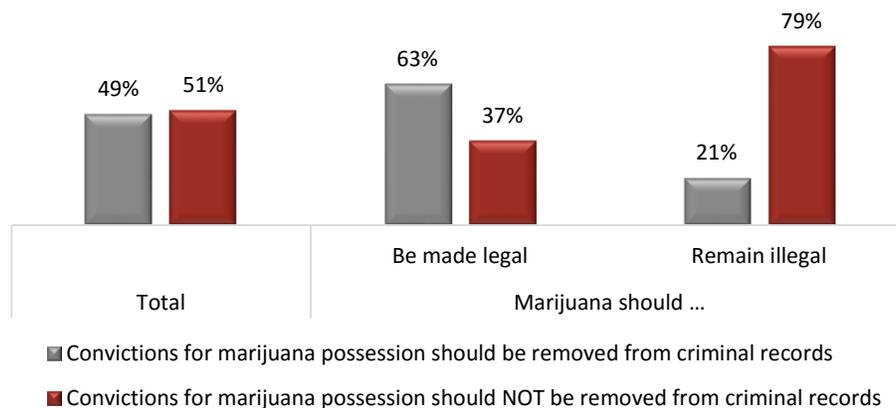
Supporters and opponents are also deeply divided on the question of what should happen to criminal records for marijuana possession if the substance were to become legal tomorrow.

Marijuana offences make up more than half of all drug-related arrests, [according to Statistics Canada](#), and roughly 80 per cent of marijuana-related arrests are for simple possession.

If and when marijuana becomes legal, what should happen to these pot users, who will suddenly have a crime on their records that no longer exists? Canadians are split down the middle on this question, with slightly more than half (51%) saying such records *shouldn't* be cleared if marijuana becomes legal.

Opponents of legalization take an especially hard line on this question. Nearly eight-in-ten (79%) say possession convictions should not be cleared from criminal records, while roughly two-in-three supporters of legalization (63%) say the opposite.

Which is closer to your opinion? Would you say that if marijuana becomes legal ...

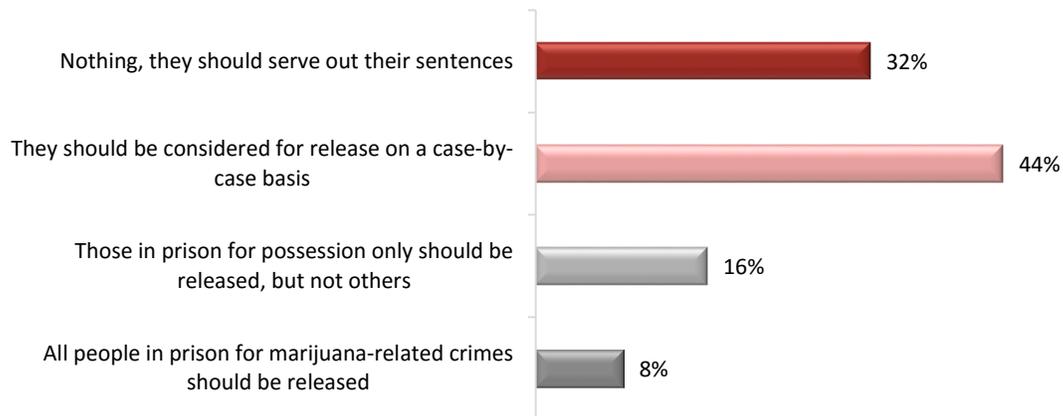


And what about people in jail for pot?

Similarly, Canadians are divided on what should happen to people serving prison sentences for marijuana-related crimes. A plurality (44%) say these people should be considered for release on a case-by-case basis should marijuana become legal, but one-in-three (32%) say legalization shouldn't have any effect on their sentences.

The rest would go further, as seen in the following graph:

Some people are currently serving prison sentences for marijuana-related crimes, including possession, cultivation, and trafficking. Assuming marijuana is legalized, what should happen to these people?



Again, Canadians who would like marijuana to remain illegal are more likely to oppose making accommodations for those who have been convicted under current pot laws. Some three-in-five (60%) in this group say those currently in prison for marijuana-related offences should serve out their sentences if the drug is made legal, compared to fewer than one-in-five (18%) of those who favour legalization who say the same ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

PART 3: Mechanics of legalization

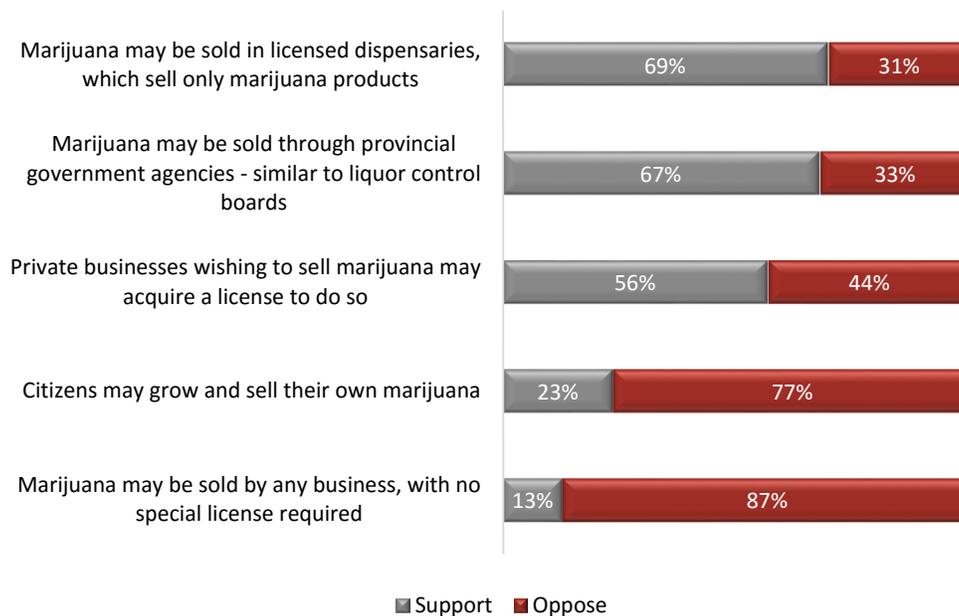
Most would set strict limits on where pot can be sold:

Since October's election confirmed that the Canadian government would legalize marijuana, [countless words have been written](#) about what exactly legal pot sales might look like.

Some, including [Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne](#), have argued for distributing marijuana through provincial liquor control boards or similar entities. Others, such as [Quebec's finance minister](#), have argued against provincial governments being in control of distribution.

On this issue, roughly two-in-three Canadians (67%) would support Wynne's position. As the following graph shows, selling marijuana through provincial agencies or specially licensed dispensaries – the two most-restrictive modes of distribution canvassed – are the options most popular with Canadians:

Would you support or oppose regulating the distribution of marijuana in each of the following ways?



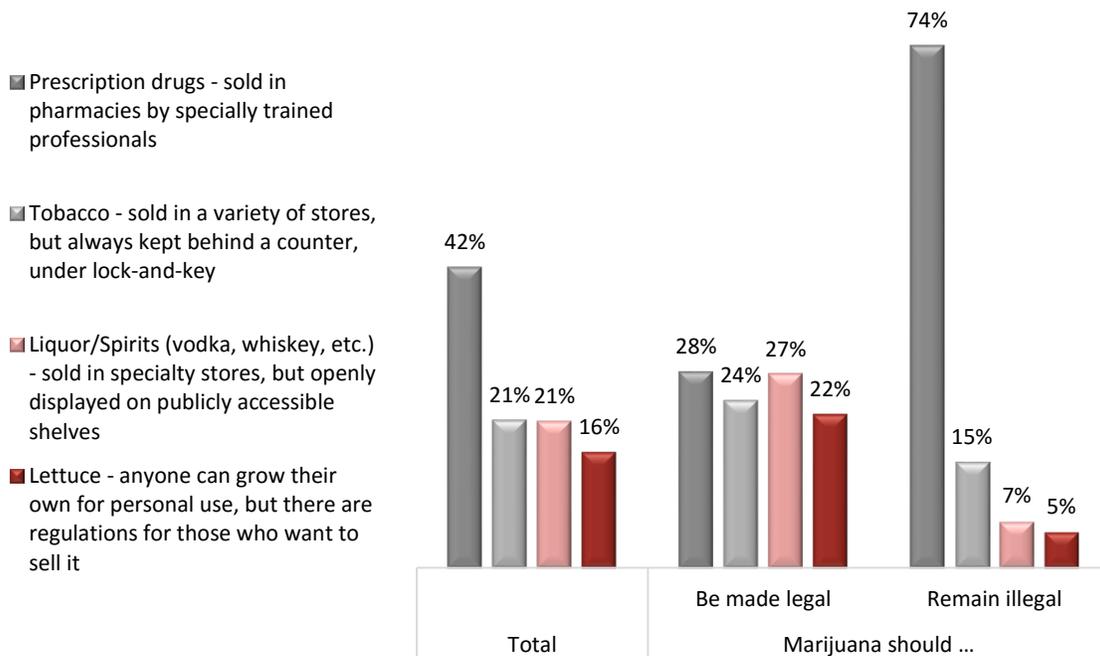
As might be expected, a majority of those who oppose legalization also oppose each of these means of selling marijuana once it's legal. It should be noted, however, that provincial control boards are the most popular option with opponents of legalization, supported by almost half of this group (45%).

At the other extreme, nearly one-in-three (32%) of those who favour making marijuana legal would support a regulatory climate in which "citizens may grow and sell their own" plants.

This represents a significant divide within the pro-legalization camp, between those who prefer tighter government control of pot distribution and those who would rather see a less-restrictive approach. This split is highlighted in a related question, which asked Canadians which currently legal – but controlled – substance marijuana most closely resembles: prescription drugs, tobacco, hard liquor, or lettuce.

Opponents of legalization are mostly united in the belief that marijuana is most similar to prescription drugs (74% feel this way), but those who would legalize are almost evenly split between the four options, as seen in the following graph:

Thinking about this another way, there are various existing models for distributing controlled substances. In your opinion, which of the following is marijuana MOST similar to?



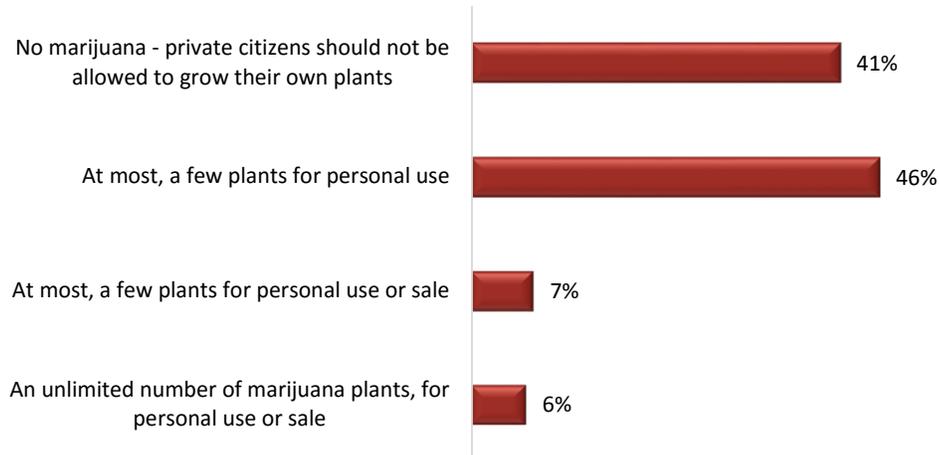
As the graph suggests, among the total population, prescription drugs are considered marijuana’s closest analogue (42%).

Most would also set limits on the private cultivation:

In February, [a federal court struck down](#) the previous government’s ban on users of medical marijuana growing their own plants. But with the current government promising to make marijuana legal for recreational purposes, the question of who should be allowed to grow the substance is an open one.

Roughly the same number of respondents say pot users should be able to grow “at most, a few plants for personal use” (46%) as say they shouldn’t be allowed to grow any (41%), but there seems to be broad consensus that if people are going to be growing it at home, Canadians don’t want them selling it:

Should people be allowed to grow:



Again, those who would like marijuana to remain illegal are more likely to opt for strict control of the substance – in this case, 80 per cent say “private citizens shouldn’t be allowed to grow their own.”

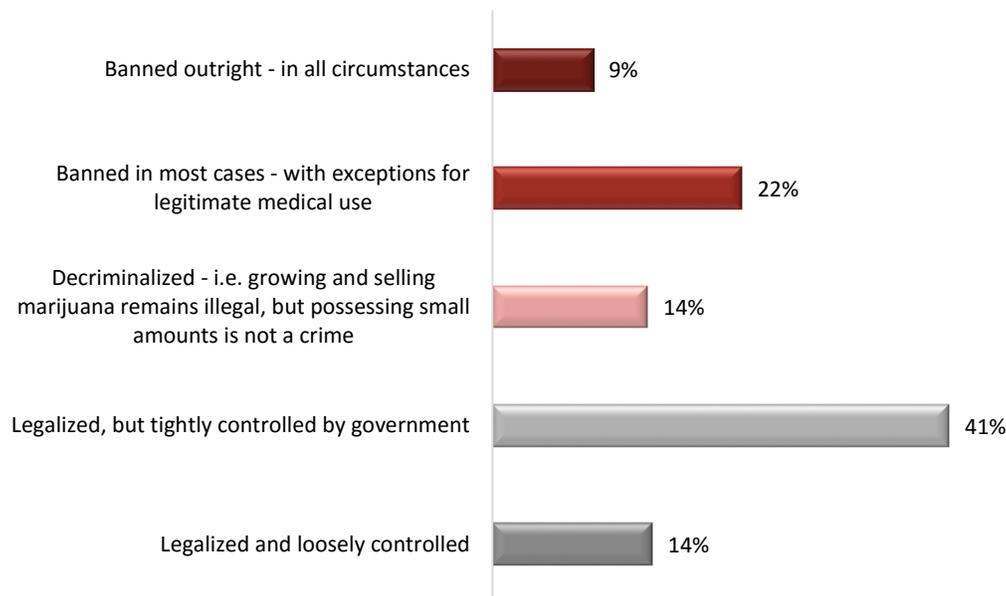
They are joined in this view by roughly one-quarter of the pro-legalization camp (23%). The rest of this pro-legalization group favours allowing Canadians to grow their own. The majority (59%) say people should be able to grow a few plants for personal use, but roughly one-in-ten choose “a few plants for personal use or sale” (10%) and “an unlimited number of plants” (8%).

Plurality opt for ‘legalized, but tightly controlled’

These nuances within the pro- and anti-legalization camps can be seen in responses to a question that offered a broad spectrum of legal approaches to marijuana – from a complete ban to legalization and lax regulation – rather than an either-or proposition.

As the following graph indicates, two-in-five Canadians (41%) would like to see marijuana “legalized, but tightly controlled by government. This is nearly twice as many as choose any other option, whether more or less restrictive:

Returning to the overall legal status of marijuana, all things considered, which of the following broad approaches to regulation most closely reflects your own opinion? Should marijuana be:



Predictably, most of those who say “make it legal” in response to the either-or question also choose one of the two legalization options on this question. The majority (56%) opt for tight control, but one-in-five (21%) choose “loose control” instead.

Likewise, most (56%) of those who say marijuana should remain illegal in the face-off question are willing to make exceptions for “legitimate medical use,” while one-in-four (25%) are not ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

PART 4: Social effects of legalization

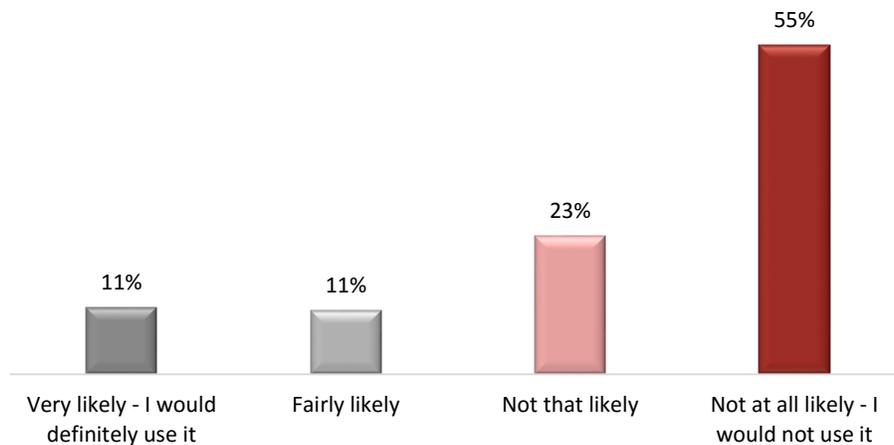
Most say they won’t use marijuana once it’s legal:

For some, the idea of legalizing marijuana no doubt brings to mind images of Canada as a nation of Amsterdam-style “coffeeshops” with green neon signs in the shape of pot leaves and Bob Marley posters on the walls.

While cannabis culture could certainly become more visible once the drug is legalized, this survey finds relatively few Canadians say they plan on embracing it.

More than half (55%) of respondents say they would not use marijuana if it were legal today, and another one-in-four (23%) say they would be “not that likely” to use it, while only one-in-ten would “definitely” partake:

Suppose marijuana were legal today. If that were the case, how likely would you be to use it?



These figures are fairly consistent with [Statistics Canada data](#), which shows 12.2 per cent of Canadians aged 15 and older having used marijuana in the last year.

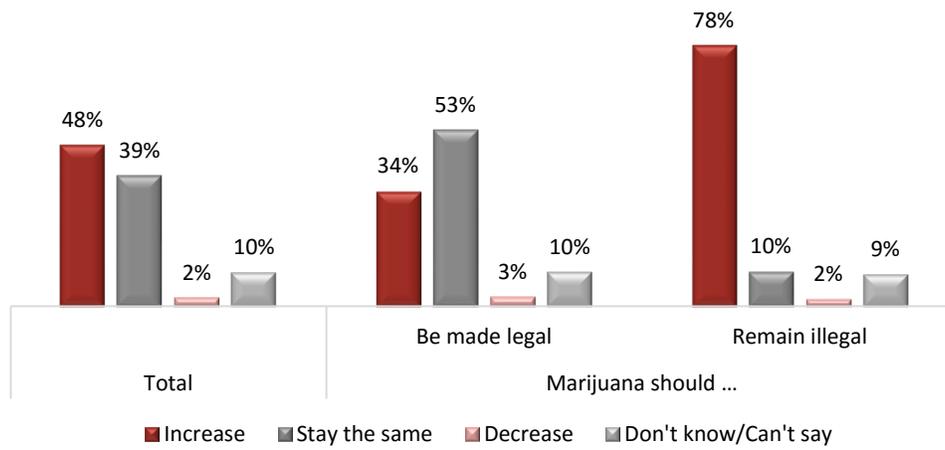
According to Statistics Canada, usage is higher among younger people and men, a pattern seen in this ARI study as well. One-fifth (20%) of Canadians under age 35 say they would “definitely” use marijuana if it were legal today. This includes one-in-four young men (24%, [see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

Many expect usage to increase

Whether or not most Canadians would, themselves, use pot if it were legal, nearly half (48%) say they expect overall usage to increase once it is.

This expectation is most pronounced among those who oppose legalization, nearly four-in-five (78%) of whom say usage will increase. Among supporters of legalization, most say the number of marijuana users will stay the same, as seen in the following graph:

Do you think the overall number of Canadians who use marijuana will increase, stay the same, or decrease after marijuana is legalized?



Other potential effects elicit strong consensus

As discussed in part two of this report, there is a wide gap between supporters and opponents of legalization on certain potential effects of changing pot laws.

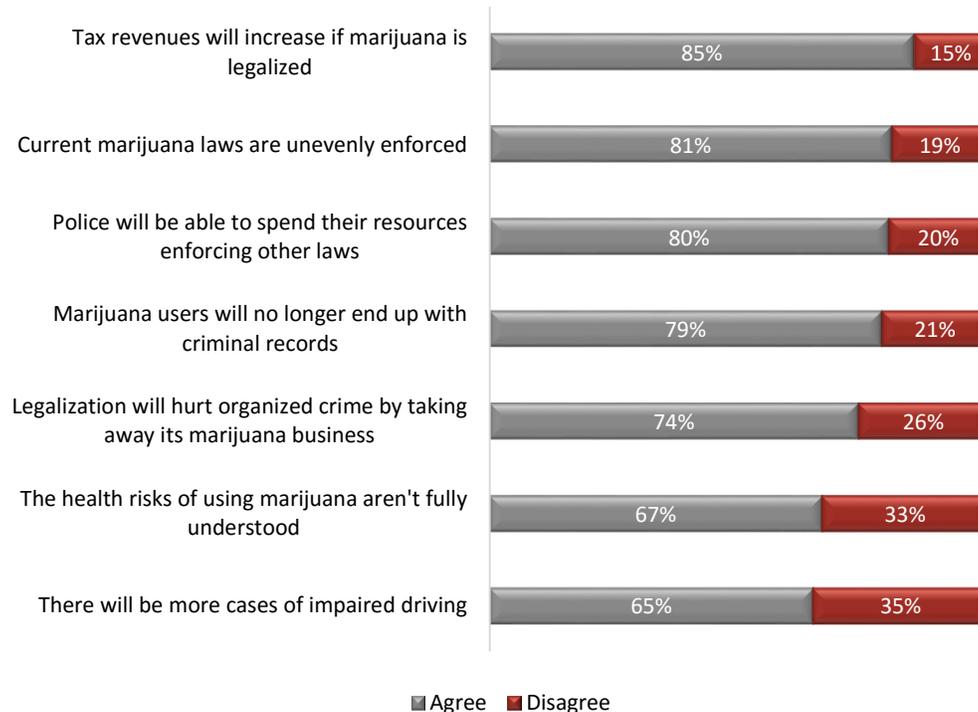
Supporters and opponents of legalization are in greater agreement on some of the other statements asked about in this survey, however, including two negative sentiments about marijuana: that the health risks of using the drug are not fully understood, and that legalizing it will lead to more cases of impaired driving.

The two sides also tend to agree about the positive consequences of legalization, including the idea that it will take marijuana production and distribution out of the hands of organized crime, increase tax revenues, and allow police to use their resources for other things.

As might be expected, those who oppose legalization are more likely to agree with the negative statements, and those who support it are more likely to agree with the positive ones. In each case, however, a majority of those on the opposite “side” of each statement still say they agree ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

The end result, as seen in the following graph, is a high level of overall agreement with each statement:

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:



What about tax revenues?

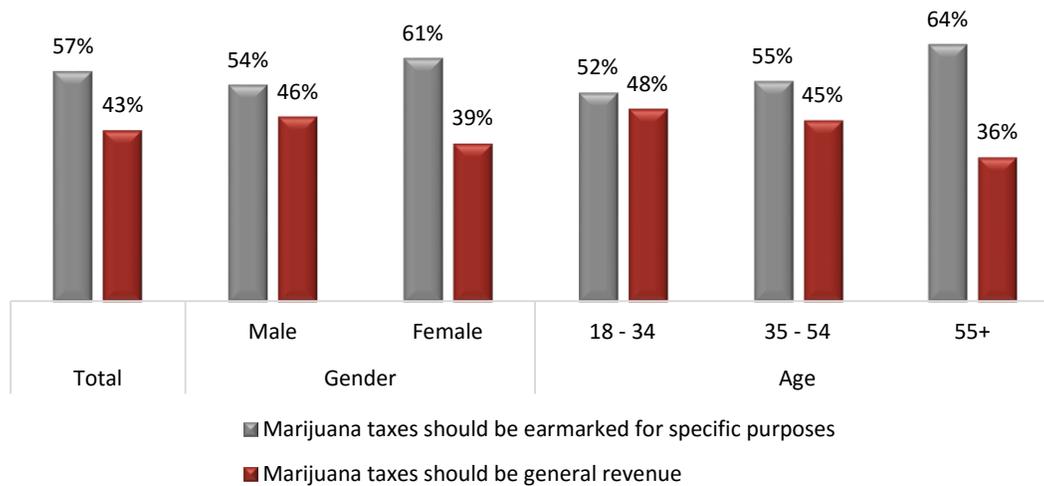
One of the things that makes marijuana legalization appealing to politicians as a policy is its potential to generate additional revenue through special taxes.

This perspective clearly appeals to Canadians as well, with 85 per cent agreeing that “tax revenues will go up if marijuana is legalized,” as seen in the preceding graph.

CIBC has estimated that sales of legalized marijuana could generate \$5 billion in revenue for Canada’s federal and provincial governments.

Asked whether this potential windfall should be earmarked for specific purposes – as is the case in Colorado, where marijuana taxes are partially reserved for spending on education – or whether it should become general revenue, most Canadians (57%) opt for the former:

In your opinion, should taxes collected on legal marijuana sales be earmarked for specific purposes, such as health care or drug treatment programs, or should they be general revenue?



As seen in the preceding graph, women and respondents aged 55 or older are more likely to opt for spending marijuana tax revenue on specific items ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

B.C. Bud: Pacific province is most pro-legalization

If and when marijuana becomes legal in Canada, nowhere will the change be more celebrated than in British Columbia.

On almost every aspect of legalization canvassed in this survey, the home province of “prince of pot” Marc Emery lives up to its 4/20-friendly reputation.

More than eight-in-ten British Columbians (81%) say “make it legal” to the marijuana face-off question, and they’re significantly more likely than other regions to identify legalization as “one of the most important issues facing Canada today” (27% choose a 4 or a 5 on the five-point scale).

On regulation, B.C. residents offer stronger-than-average support for loose government control (22%), and one-in-four British Columbians (24%) say marijuana is most analogous to lettuce in terms of how it should be treated by government.

Residents of Canada’s Left Coast province also stridently agree with statements about the positive effects of legalization (more than 80% agree with each one), and three-in-four (75%) say legalizing pot will do more good than harm.

[See comprehensive tables for greater detail](#) on British Columbia and to see where other regions stand on the questions asked in this survey.

The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.

Summary tables follow. For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and support for legalization, among other demographics, [click here](#).

| Do you think the use of marijuana in Canada should be made legal, or not? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------|
| (weighted sample sizes) | Total (1522) | Region | | | | | | |
| | | 18 - 24 (180) | 25 - 34 (261) | 35 - 44 (251) | 45 - 54 (280) | 55 - 64 (252) | 65 - 74 (218) | 75+ (80*) |
| Yes, make it legal | 68% | 62% | 73% | 74% | 64% | 69% | 70% | 53% |
| No, it should remain illegal | 32% | 38% | 27% | 26% | 36% | 31% | 30% | 47% |

*small sample size