

# Cannabis



## KEY POINTS

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- Cannabis arrests accounted for around 70 percent of all drug arrests in Australia. This has remained stable since 1998–99.
- The majority of cannabis consumed in Australia is domestically cultivated. Importations of cannabis are not generally economically viable.
- Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug in Australia.

## MAIN FORMS

Cannabis plants are categorised into two types: hemp and marijuana. Hemp is fibrous and low in psychoactive components, hence its use in clothing, paper and skin care products. In contrast, marijuana is high in psychoactive components and the leaves, resin and oil are used as a drug.

The principal active ingredient in cannabis is delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) which slows down central nervous system activity to the brain. THC is concentrated in the flowers or ‘heads’ of the plant, with the leaves and stems containing lower THC concentration. Cannabis can produce hallucinogenic effects and may cause psychosis in vulnerable users (AIC, 2005; Australian Drug Foundation, 2003). Research also suggests a causal link between cannabis use and increased risk of developing schizophrenia (AIC, 2005; Zammit, Allebeck, Andreasson, Lundberg, and Lewis, 2002). The main forms of cannabis and methods of administration are outlined in Table 7.

**Table 7: Main forms of cannabis**

Form	Description	Properties	Method of administration
Herbal cannabis	The leaves and flowering heads	Low levels of THC	Smoked as a rolled cigarette or inhaled through a water pipe or ‘bong’
Cannabis resin (hashish)	Made from the resinous material of the cannabis plant, dried and compressed into balls, blocks or sheets. Colour ranges from light brown to black	Medium levels of THC	Crumbled and smoked in a pipe or bong, rolled into a cigarette with cannabis leaf or tobacco, or cooked with food and eaten
Cannabis oil	Viscous oil extracted using a solvent such as acetone or methanol. Colour ranges from amber to dark brown	High levels of THC	Small amounts applied to cannabis or tobacco cigarettes; can also be heated and the vapour inhaled

## INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug in Mexico, the US and Canada, and the most widely trafficked and used drug in Africa (INCB, 2006). Seizure data indicates that domestic cannabis production in Canada has increased. In the US, most of the foreign-produced cannabis is generally trafficked into the country by Mexican criminal groups, although there has been increased involvement of Asian networks trafficking high potency cannabis through the Canadian–US border. This has consequently affected the availability of cannabis in the Canadian domestic market. The influence of Asian criminal groups in the US cannabis market is likely to increase in the short term and rivals the influence of Russian–Israeli, Jamaican or Puerto Rican criminal groups.

Africa is currently the second largest producer of cannabis (after North America) and accounts for 28 percent of global production. Afghanistan continues to cultivate large quantities of cannabis, with farmers dedicating 30,000 hectares to cannabis cultivation in 2005 (UNODC, 2005). Despite a 45 percent reduction in domestic cannabis production, Morocco is one of the main global producers of cannabis resin. The majority of Moroccan hashish is supplied to the European market (UNODC, 2006).

Between July and December 2005, Argentina, Colombia and Egypt all recorded large seizures of cannabis, with a combined total of approximately 25,333 kilograms. During this period, Portugal and Pakistan recorded 241 seizures of cannabis resin, totalling approximately 34,400 kilograms (UNODC, 2006a).

Cannabis use in the Asia region is also considered widespread and is the first or second most commonly used illicit drug, particularly in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei (Devaney, Reid and Baldwin, 2006).

## DOMESTIC TRENDS

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### Australian border situation

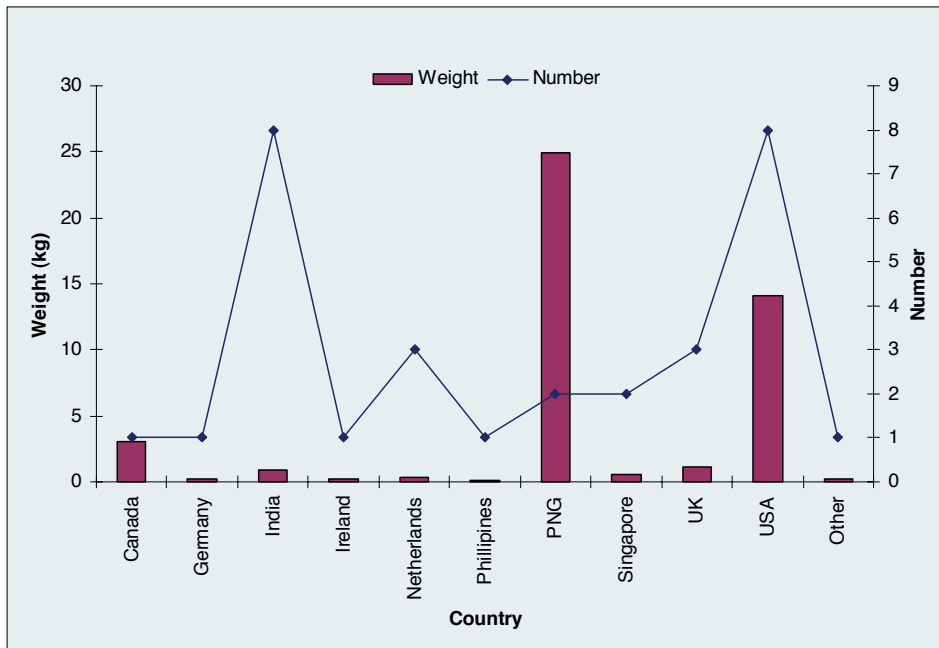
Domestic cultivation of cannabis influences patterns of trafficking to Australia, generally making imports of cannabis products unprofitable, with some exceptions. Cannabis import ventures of Australian drug entrepreneurs have traditionally concentrated on attempts to import cannabis resin, cannabis oil, or high quality cannabis grown in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Cannabis products are bulky, difficult to conceal, and their strong odour makes them vulnerable to detection. The majority of cannabis detections at the Australian border are personal use quantities found on air passengers or sent to Australia by post.

Hydroponic cultivation of cannabis in Australia for trafficking purposes relies on the availability of high quality seeds for high THC content strains of the plant, marketed primarily out of the Netherlands, sold online and delivered by post.

### Significant detections

Customs detections of cannabis products at the Australian border in 2005–06 totalled 47.6 kilograms, an increase from less than five kilograms in 2004–05, and approximately 15 kilograms in 2003–04. Of 505 detections, only 28 were above 100 grams and only five were above one kilogram (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Country of embarkation for cannabis importations of more than 100 grams, detected by Customs 2005–06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)**



Over half of all cannabis product detections (254 out of 505) involved seeds, found mostly in small numbers intended for home cultivation. They were also occasionally detected in 100 gram, 250 gram or 500 gram packets, indicating purchase of seeds for larger scale commercial cultivation ventures.

Among the five detections of over one kilogram, three involved attempted imports of hemp protein nutritional supplements from Canada and the US. While hemp protein falls within the import prohibitions on all parts of the cannabis plant, this substance is currently not a drug of abuse. In a rare attempt to import a marketable quantity of cannabis leaf to Australia, 24.4 kilograms of compressed cannabis was concealed in 700 kilograms of bagged sugar sent by air cargo from Papua New Guinea and detected at Cairns Airport on 5 August 2005.

### Importation methods

In 2005–06 cannabis was detected in postal articles, air cargo parcels, luggage of air passengers, in clothing worn by passengers and concealed on the body.

# DOMESTIC MARKET INDICATORS

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Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia, despite a decrease in recent use evidenced in previous years. Findings from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) suggest recent use of cannabis to be at its lowest in 11 years. Notwithstanding, the NDSHS estimates that approximately 5.5 million Australians aged over 14 years have tried cannabis (AIHW, 2005). Cannabis is a widely accepted drug and is often used in the management of emotional side effects of other drug use and to assist in the ‘come down’ associated with MDMA consumption.

The extent of cannabis use, coupled with the relative acceptability of use amongst the Australian public, forms part of the reasoning behind the decision to formulate the *National Cannabis Strategy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). The *National Cannabis Strategy* has been endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) and was developed within the existing legislative framework. It is consistent with Australia’s *National Drug Strategy* and aims to provide a comprehensive and balanced approach to supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction strategies (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006).

The majority of cannabis consumed in Australia is domestically produced, with cultivation prolific in all states and territories. While large outdoor bush plots, ranging in size from one to tens of thousands of plants, remain common in some states and territories, the most commonly detected method of cultivating cannabis is through the use of hydroponics (or other enhanced indoor cultivation methods). These are usually detected within residential premises. Although the number of plants is typically lower for hydroponic cultivation, growing cannabis hydroponically means it can be grown all year round and produces a higher yield of ‘head’ or ‘buds’ in a shorter period of time.

These enhanced indoor cultivation methods have been refined by Vietnamese criminal groups in Canada to yield high potency cannabis (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2002). There are indications that some Vietnamese Australians have travelled to Canada to further their cultivation knowledge and skills. However, it is important to note that no single criminal group dominates cannabis cultivation or supply in Australia.

## NSW legislative changes—enhanced indoor cultivation

Each State and Territory varies with regards to civil or criminal penalties for cannabis offences.<sup>5</sup> Recent amendments to the *Drug Misuse and Trafficking Act 1985 (NSW)* reflect improved provisions concerning the commercial cultivation of prohibited plants, defined in Section 36TA of the Act, by enhanced indoor means. In accordance with the Act’s provisions, prohibited plants include cannabis, coca and opium poppy plants.

Enhanced indoor cultivation is defined in Section 3 of the Act. It includes nurturing the plant in nutrient enriched water as opposed to soil (hydroponics), suspending the plants roots and spraying them with a nutrient-rich solution (aeroponics) and/or the use of an artificial source of light or heat. Such methods are commonly referred to as hydroponics, although they are not all truly hydroponic in nature.

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<sup>5</sup> South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Western Australia have prohibition with civil penalty schemes or infringement notices. Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland have prohibition with cautioning and diversion to treatment (NSW Legislative Council, 2006).

The legislation also introduces new offences of:

- cultivating prohibited plants by enhanced indoor means of quantities greater than small quantities but less than commercial quantities; and
- cultivating prohibited plants by enhanced indoor means in the presence of children.

Effective from 14 July 2006, these amendments were introduced as a result of New South Wales authorities identifying an increase in the involvement of highly organised crime groups, including former Yugoslavian criminal groups, in the indoor cultivation of cannabis in domestic premises. Previously, New South Wales legislation did not reflect the commerciality of hydroponic operations and penalties were based upon the yield, harvest patterns and profitability of outdoor bush cannabis (NSW Legislative Council, 2006). The new provisions set commercial and large commercial quantities at five times lower than outdoor cannabis to reflect the higher yields produced by hydroponic methods (NSW Legislative Council, 2006). The new provisions also amend the *Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002 (NSW)* to enable police to respond effectively to clandestine and organised activity, and the *Electricity Supply Act 1995 (NSW)*, to increase maximum penalties associated with the stealing of electricity to support hydroponic systems.

## Price

Quality and type are major determinants in cannabis prices, with users reportedly paying more for hydroponic cannabis than cannabis grown outdoors. Across Australia, the price of one gram of hydroponic cannabis ranged from \$15 to \$60, with an ounce (approximately 28 grams) ranging from \$220 to \$400.

## Availability

According to NDARC research conducted in 2006, cannabis was described as 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain by the majority of injecting drug users in all jurisdictions. This is consistent with previous years' results. The survey noted that hydroponic cannabis was regarded as having a higher potency than outdoor grown 'bush cannabis' (NDARC, 2006).

In 2005, there was a decrease in the percentage of police detainees testing positive to cannabis when compared to the previous year. However, it remains the most commonly detected drug in detainees, with an average of 54 percent of males and females testing positive to cannabis in 2005<sup>6</sup> (Mouzos, Smith and Hind, 2006).

## Seizures and arrests

The weight of cannabis seizures declined in 2005–06 and the number of seizures remained relatively stable (see Figure 13). This continues the trend of decreasing cannabis seizure weight which has been occurring for the past three years. New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Northern Territory reported increases in the number of seizures. With the exception of South Australia, all jurisdictions reported a decrease in the weight of seizures (see Table 8).

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<sup>6</sup> The level of detection may be partly attributable to the fact that cannabis use can be detected up to 30 days after use, whereas the detectable period may be less than four days for some other drugs.

Figure 13: National cannabis seizures, by weight and number, 1996–97 to 2005–06

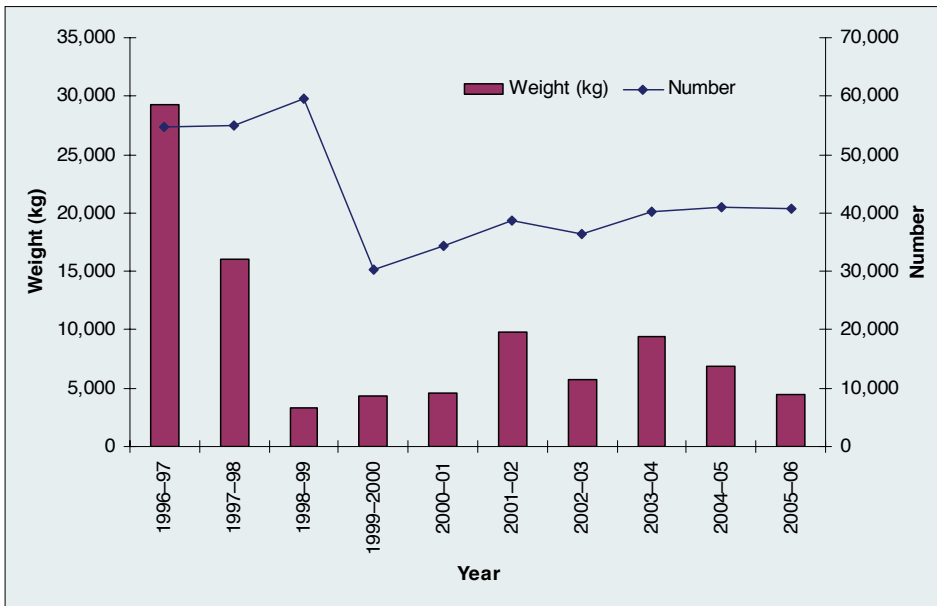


Table 8: Number, weight and percentage change of national cannabis seizures, 2004–05 and 2005–06

State/territory <sup>a</sup>	Number			Weight (grams)		
	2004–05	2005–06	% change	2004–05	2005–06	% change
NSW	8,021	8,579	7.0	962,359	869,773	-9.6
Vic	3,143	2,904	-7.6	2,667,407	1,255,358	-52.9
Qld	17,533	16,998	-3.1	1,450,002	852,543	-41.2
SA	251	516	105.6	377,646	793,303	110.1
WA	8,847	9,215	4.2	391,401	313,095	-20.0
Tas	1,854	863	-53.5	449,341	40,687	-90.9
NT	878	1,146	30.5	56,737	55,662	-1.9
ACT	553	458	-17.2	566,770	302,205	-46.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>41,080</b>	<b>40,679</b>	<b>-1.0</b>	<b>6,921,663</b>	<b>4,482,626</b>	<b>-35.2</b>

a. Includes seizures by state/territory police and AFP for which a valid seizure weight was recorded.

There was little difference in the national number of cannabis arrests between 2004–05 and 2005–06 (see Table 9). The number of cannabis arrests in Australia has remained relatively stable for at least the last five years (see Table 10).

**Table 9: Number and percentage change of national cannabis arrests, 2004–05 and 2005–06**

State/territory <sup>a</sup>	Arrests		% change
	2004–05	2005–06	
NSW	6,583	8,842	34.3
Vic	7,221	6,901	-4.4
Qld	23,355	23,235	-0.5
SA	1,512	1,604	6.1
SA (CENs) <sup>b</sup>	4,784	5,502	15.0
WA	5,173	4,203	-18.8
WA (CINs) <sup>c</sup>	3,782	3,208	-15.2
Tas	1,353	929	-31.3
NT	429	526	22.6
NT (DINs) <sup>d</sup>	434	481	10.8
ACT	228	240	5.3
ACT (SCONs) <sup>e</sup>	82	61	-25.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>54,936</b>	<b>55,732</b>	<b>1.4</b>

a. Includes arrests by state/territory police and AFP.

b. Cannabis Expiation Notices.

c. Cannabis Infringement Notices.

d. Drug Infringement Notices.

e. Simple Cannabis Offence Notices.

**Table 10: Number of national cannabis arrests, by state and territory, 2001–02 to 2005–06**

State/territory <sup>a</sup>	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06
NSW	12,121	12,368	11,054	6,583	8,842
Vic	6,692	7,022	7,620	7,221	6,901
Qld	17,068	19,879	22,065	23,355	23,235
SA	2,377	2,028	1,919	1,512	1,604
SA (CENs) <sup>b</sup>	7,435	5,849	5,382	4,784	5,502
WA	7,156	6,028	6,108	5,173	4,203
WA (CINs) <sup>c</sup>	–	–	994 <sup>d</sup>	3,782	3,208
Tas	1,540	1,830	1,638	1,353	929
NT	397	257	315	429	526
NT (DINs) <sup>e</sup>	425	148	300	434	481
ACT	178	196	267	228	240
ACT (SCONs) <sup>f</sup>	105	84	79	82	61
<b>Total</b>	<b>55,494</b>	<b>55,689</b>	<b>57,741</b>	<b>54,936</b>	<b>55,732</b>

a. Includes arrests by state/territory police and AFP.

b. Cannabis Expiation Notices.

c. Cannabis Infringement Notices; introduced in April 2004.

d. Figures are for the period of April – June 2004 only.

e. Drug Infringement Notices.

f. Simple Cannabis Offence Notices.

## NATIONAL IMPACT

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While research suggests that cannabis use has declined over the last decade, it remains the most commonly used and widely accepted illicit drug in Australia. Around 70 percent of all drug arrests nationally are for cannabis offences, a proportion that has remained steady for several years.

The demand for cannabis is not likely to decrease in the short term, with enhanced means of indoor production (commonly referred to as hydroponics) continuing to be commonly detected by Australian law enforcement.

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