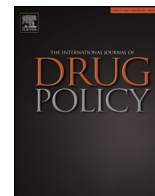




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Research paper

Attitudes towards drug policies in Latin America: Results from a Latin-American Survey[☆]Andrés Mendiburo-Seguel^{a,*}, Salvador Vargas^b, Juan C. Oyanedel^c, Francisca Torres^b, Eduardo Vergara^d, Mike Hough^e^a Faculty of Management and Economics, Universidad de Santiago de Chile and Facultad de Psicología, Universidad Diego Portales, Chile^b Fundación Centro de Estudios Cuantitativos, Chile^c Facultad de Educación, Universidad Nacional Andrés Bello, Chile^d Asuntos del Sur, Chile^e Birkbeck, University of London, England, UK

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ABSTRACT

Background: In recent years Latin American countries have increasingly rejected the traditional prohibitionist paradigm of drug policy, reflecting its failure to reduce either consumption or trafficking. The extent to which these policy trends currently command public support is unclear, however. This article goes some way to filling this gap, providing a snapshot of public attitudes towards drug policies in nine Latin American countries.

Methods: The 2014 Annual Survey of the Observatory of Drug Policies and Public Opinion, which has representative population samples, was used to measure public opinion. Country comparisons are made using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results: Countries fall into three groups: Peru, Bolivia and El Salvador are the most conservative countries on drug policy and perceptions of risks of cannabis use; they also score lowest on Human Development Index. On the other hand, the public in Chile and Uruguay are more likely to support drug policy reform. The remaining four countries (Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Peru) tend to occupy the middle ground between these extremes. In addition, cannabis legalization is explained by its recreational use, being this the main meaning attached to cannabis policy among Latin American citizens.

Conclusion: There is a significant heterogeneity in attitudes towards drug policies in Latin American countries, which suggests that people are questioning the policies that set the norm in Latin America without achieving any consensus regarding future measures for each country.

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Introduction

Drug policies in Latin America have focused on the prohibition of drug consumption and trafficking since the early 20th century. Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug in Latin America (with the possible exception of coca leaf in some countries) with prevalence rates between 4% and 13% (Comisión Nacional Para el

Desarrollo y Vida Sin Drogas, 2012; Comunidad Andina, 2013; Fleiz, Borges, Rojas, Benjet, & Medina, 2007; Gobierno Nacional de la República de Colombia, 2014; Instituto sobre Alcoholismo y Farmacodependencia, 2012; Observatorio Argentino de Drogas, 2010; Observatorio Interamericano sobre Drogas, 2011; Observatorio Chileno de Drogas, 2013; Observatorio Uruguayo de Drogas, 2012). Cannabis is certainly the most commonly used psychotropic drug world-wide (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014).

In most of the countries of the region, trafficking of most psychotropic drugs is illegal. All nine countries covered by this study – Mexico, Colombia, Perú, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica and El Salvador – are signatories to the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, and all have legislation that criminalises

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the production and distribution of drugs listed in the three UN conventions. However, many South American countries tolerate chewing of coca leaf – and most accept this among indigenous groups – and the Bolivian President, Evo Morales, in particular has called in 2009 and 2011 for the removal of chewing of coca leaf from the list of proscribed activities in the Single Convention of 1961.

The legal status of drug possession (or consumption) varies: in El Salvador, Colombia and Bolivia it is still a criminal offence—though there may be some informal decriminalisation.¹ In Argentina too, possession is prohibited by law, though the relevant legislation was declared unconstitutional in 2009 (Monroy, 2013). Mexico has decriminalised possession of small amounts of cannabis, cocaine and other drugs listed by the UN conventions. Uruguay never criminalised possession of cannabis for personal use, but has legalised cultivation, distribution and use of cannabis, accompanied by a firm – but only partially implemented – regime of state regulation (Pardo, 2014), following the reform process driven by the former president José Mujica. Legalisation or decriminalisation is under consideration in Chile, where possession of small amounts of some drugs is already informally decriminalised and where the biggest medical cannabis farm in Latin America is located. Peru has a statute that specifies volume thresholds below which possession of a single type of drug is decriminalised. Costa Rica appears to have decriminalised possession for personal use of small amounts of cannabis.

Thus there is a very clear direction of travel across Latin American countries towards forms of liberalisation of the drug laws. The main underpinning argument for reform has been that the prohibitionist approach has proved inefficient and ineffective (Pardo, 2010), with a sustained international growth of drug trafficking, and the progressive enrichment of drug-dealing organizations (Cartay, 1994). The other main argument used by reformers relates to the systemic violence that accompanies trafficking, contributing to the high rates of homicides and other indicators of violence in countries like Mexico, Colombia and Bolivia. In Mexico, during the presidential term of Felipe Calderón, violence increased despite tough drug enforcement strategies (Shirk, 2011). A commonly used argument is that prohibitionist policies increase the competition between criminal organisations, which in turn triggers violence. The empirical evidence supports this argument² (Werb et al., 2011).

This article focuses on public attitudes towards cannabis use, as this is clearly the drug where there is the most realistic prospect of reform. The article proceeds as follows. First we consider what is already known about public opinion in Latin America about cannabis and its control. We then set out the aims, and (in brief) the methods of the study. We then present the headline findings, first comparing opinion across the ten countries towards legalisation. We then present findings on perceptions of relative risks of cannabis, alcohol and tobacco, and findings on enforcement strategies. A further section examines the demographic and country predictors of attitudes. The paper concludes by setting the finding in an international context and drawing out the policy implications.

¹ We use the term decriminalisation to include any form of non-enforcement that falls short of legalisation. Decriminalisation can be informal (where police simply 'turn a blind eye' to offences), or can be subject to formal rules. Some jurisdictions use depenalisation to mean the same thing.

² Among the countries that took part of this research, El Salvador and Colombia show the highest homicide rates, with 41 and 31 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants respectively (The World Bank, n.d.). In the rest of the countries, Chile, Argentina, México, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay and Costa Rica, homicide rates are 3, 6, 22, 12, 10, 8 and 9 respectively.

Public opinion on cannabis in Latin America

Historically, two interrelated strands of opinion can be identified in Latin American opinion about cannabis (and illicit drugs more generally). The first dimension relates to the perceived value of the 'war on drugs', that is, efforts to reduce the production, trafficking and consumption of drugs. The second dimension relates to the risks to users of drug consumption, strategies for reducing use and reducing the damage done by drug use and local drug markets to communities in terms of personal health and community safety (Arriagada & Hopenhayn, 2000; Hopenhayn, 2002).

The dominant popular image of cannabis that emerged in Latin America in the 1970s, and continued certainly until the turn of the century, was of a highly destructive threat that demanded urgent action. The threat was mainly associated with youth and crime, and consumers were stigmatized (Del Olmo, 1989; Folgar, 2003). It was also considered to be a major social problem – along with corruption and political violence – and a growing problem—even though prevalence statistics do not indicate this (Arriagada & Hopenhayn, 2000).

Since 2000 there have been signs of a progressive shift away from this negative view of cannabis, and from the view that prohibition and tough enforcement is the solution to trafficking and consumption (Sanjurjo, 2013). The debate on drug policy, especially in Chile, Mexico and Uruguay, has moved gradually from the image of drug use as a disease that corrupts the social fabric, to a perspective based on harm reduction and on the need for liberalization of cannabis legislation. There has been a shift towards an approach that respects the autonomy and integrity of individuals who choose to use cannabis and rejects the prohibitionist approach (Sanjurjo, 2013). The clearest example of this shift can be found in Uruguay's decision to legalise and regulate production, supply and consumption, and thus undermine illicit drug markets (Rovira, Decia, & La Rosa, 2014).

Another factor that has influenced changes in the perception of cannabis and other drugs is the status of different countries as producers of drugs. In the 1990s, for example, support for prohibitionist policies among the Colombian public was increased by terrorist atrocities associated with the drugs trade, but eroded by evidence of political corruption and complicity with the drugs trade within the justice system. Traffickers had a degree of success at this time in delegitimizing the regime by pointing to widespread violation by politicians or officials of laws and regulations (Thoumi, 1995). More recently, however, the sheer scale of violence associated with the drugs trade and with enforcement action against it has been a more important factor in turning Colombian public opinion against prohibitionist policies (Restrepo, 2013).

Peru, one of the largest producers of the drug industry, represents a different situation because major drug traffickers have not been closely integrated into society, and have no leverage over public opinion; and thus there is no special sympathy towards them (Castro, 2005).

There is enough research on public opinion on cannabis and other drugs to chart the basic dynamics of attitudes. Historically, across Latin American countries prohibitionist policies drew support from public concern about the threats posed by illicit drugs—but this support has waned in the face of evidence about ineffectiveness of enforcement strategies, and growing evidence that prohibitionist strategies amplify the violence associated with trafficking. What is lacking, however, is a proper comparative account of contemporary public opinion in Latin America, at a time when political thinking is shifting quite rapidly towards liberalization of cannabis legislation.

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