

Status of drug testing study

Overview

Professor Hawken is leading a project to test for THC urine samples provided by individuals on community supervision in Washington State. Washington legalized the recreational use of marijuana in 2012. As of June 1, 2014, to align with state policy, the Washington Department of Corrections (WADOC) *discontinued* testing for THC. An important unknown clouding the policy change in Washington State is whether this reform will lead to an increase in marijuana use and, if so, whether this will result in a change—*increase or decrease*—in the use of other drugs and violating behavior. The policy change in Washington State presents a unique opportunity for an unprecedented natural experiment. The study is also unusual in the degree and kind of collaboration between the research team and WADOC. Following the reforms of 2014, WADOC *may not test* for THC (except in the rare instance that marijuana was specifically prohibited at sentencing). By collaborating with an independent research team to conduct research-only testing for THC (i.e., no individual results of THC tests are shared with DOC), valuable information that would otherwise have been lost is now available to researchers with experience in studying the patterns and consequences of drug use. WADOC is responsible for collecting specimens per routine practice and testing for illicit substances *other* than THC. The test results for these illicit substances are clearly marked on the specimen cup. The specimens are then carefully packaged and geocoded and shipped to the research team in California. Geocoding allows the team to later link results of individual drug tests to office-level and community-level outcomes while strictly maintaining confidentiality. The team receives the specimens at a research lab where a team of 12 laboratory testers tests the specimens for THC, recording information about the specimen (i.e., shipment date, result of the THC test, test results for other illicit substances, and geocoding information) and maintaining the data repository.

Funding

Good Ventures provided \$150,000 in funding for the drug-testing study, particularly for urine collection and storage. Of that amount, about \$120,000 has been spent so far; we expect the balance to cover the remaining testing costs and shipping invoices. Testing costs have been lower than anticipated because the testers have been more efficient, testing more samples per hour, than expected.

Originally Professor Hawken hoped to get government funding through the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which expressed interest in the project and encouraged her to apply for an expedited funding mechanism. Subsequent to initial discussions, however, NIH representatives did not respond to queries regarding funding decisions. Without the timely support of Good Ventures this project would not have been possible.

Progress and preliminary results

Shipping of specimens from WADOC was discontinued on November 30, 2015, when collection reached about 50,000 specimens. This is the first study to show how marijuana use (and the use of other drugs) changes in a legal environment, using a “hard” objective measure (results of a

drug screen rather than self-reported data). It provides an unusually rich dataset to support broader research goals to study changes in drug use and in criminal-justice outcomes changes that follow marijuana legalization. The large sample supports an analysis of drug-use trends and switching patterns (from one drug to another) even for low-prevalence (but concerning) drugs, such as opiates. Data collection (testing of samples and receipt of administrative data from WADOC) and a final report will be complete in the first quarter of 2016.