

The Road to Success or Failure?

Trends in Marijuana Use in Germany Immediately before and after Legalisation

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Introduction: In the spring of 2024, Germany partially legalised marijuana use, allowing adults to possess and consume limited amounts of cannabis. This move sparked significant social and political debate, but also created new research opportunities for analysing the effects of drug policy.

Aims: This study aims to analyse how marijuana consumption has changed in the months before and after legalisation. Is this path leading to success or failure?

Methodology: The study was conducted using the most recent information and literature reviews available from 2023 onwards. The author reviewed content from various scientific fields to update and expand her knowledge of the subject.

Result: Based on the data available so far, consumption has increased, especially among young adults (aged 18–29), but it is also evident that younger and younger people are trying cannabis. The increase in recent years is cause for concern. Currently, German consumers face the problem of difficulty in obtaining the legally permissible amount, mainly due to underdeveloped infrastructure and bureaucracy. According to surveys, most people tried the drug out of curiosity or for recreational purposes, while regular users mainly use it to relieve stress or treat sleep disorders. Some studies suggest that, in parallel with partial legalisation, the black market share of cannabis has also started to grow, as the delay in obtaining legal cannabis may result in people turning to illegal sources while waiting to purchase the legalised substance. Illegal dealers are also adapting to the changed situation by selling their products more cheaply and in larger quantities, making it easier for consumers to obtain the drug, even though more and more people would prefer controlled-quality,

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legally available products. It is also important to mention that the prescription of cannabis for medical purposes has increased many times over, which may hinder the proper functioning of the healthcare system and increase the risks of consumption, especially since it can now be prescribed electronically. The authorities are paying particular attention to protecting young people and strengthening prevention campaigns, but they believe that prevention alone is not enough.

Conclusion: Overall, it can be said that the trend in marijuana consumption in Germany has not yet achieved the planned goal following partial legalisation, which, let us face it, is almost impossible in just one year. The German people do not want a complete ban again, and the regulation has caused conflicts between political parties, but further detailed research is needed to accurately assess the longer-term social, health and economic impacts.

Keywords: partial legalisation in Germany, effectiveness, road accidents, medical use, drug policy

Introduction

What has prompted Germany to legalise cannabis? The 1961 UN Convention listed marijuana as one of the most dangerous drugs (United Nations 1961). Since then, it is not new that there have been several attempts to legalise cannabis in Germany. In 1992, the state of Hesse was the first to propose coffeeshops in support of legalisation, followed four years later by the state of Schleswig-Holstein, but there have been various proposals from different states, ranging from coffeeshops to medical marijuana (Hessisches Landeskriminalamt Wiesbaden 1992). However, eight years ago, the German Parliament accepted the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes, opening the door to the pro-legalisation community. In 2020, marijuana was removed from the UN's list of the most dangerous drugs (World Health Organization 2020). Political parties differed on this issue, but the 'traffic light coalition' of Greens, SPD and FDP also supported controlled recreational use of marijuana, so in 2021 the three-party coalition, led by Olaf Scholz, pledged to support a cannabis legalisation initiative at federal level.

In the following years, draft laws were developed, which naturally led to social and professional debates. Legislation was passed in several stages. In the first stage, it was decided that a maximum of 20 grams of marijuana could be possessed by people using the substance, that 18 to 21-year-olds could buy cannabis containing up to 10% THC, and that people over 21 could buy cannabis containing up to 15% THC from pharmacies or from licensed marijuana shops (KEILBACH 2021). As with alcohol and tobacco products, legally sold cannabis will be taxed. It was already highlighted in the draft at the time that shops selling cannabis could not be opened in the vicinity of nurseries and schools. In addition, it was considered important to ban the importation of marijuana and the advertising of marijuana.

In 2023, the Liberals were eager to get the licence, and then one spring day they presented a new draft, which stated that consumers could buy up to 25 grams, but only from cannabis clubs. They would be able to buy a total of 50 grams of cannabis in a month. For home cultivation, on the other hand, people would be allowed to keep 3 hemp plants (Südwestrundfunk 2025). It was essential for the German Government that they comply, of course, with the international convention to which Germany is a signatory. There were various criticisms of the first draft in terms of THC content and quantity. In 2023, the idea was modified and a two-tier system was introduced. Initially, only cannabis clubs would be allowed to sell marijuana, where members could buy up to 50 grams and grow 3 hemp plants at home. After that, the second step, which is still to come, would be for licensed shops to distribute the product. Because of the system introduced, the income previously calculated has been considerably less than originally anticipated. Controversy persisted, as the police also considered that it was almost impossible to measure the THC content and verify whether the product was legally or illegally obtained. Following the coalition agreement of 2021 and the revision of the 2022–2023 draft law, Germany took the historic step of partially legalising marijuana consumption in the spring of 2024.

The Conservative parties still did not support this decision, but a compromise of sorts was reached to invest more energy and money in prevention and to be much stricter in controls and to keep a constant check on cannabis clubs. German citizens and consumers living in Germany will be able to grow and possess cannabis for their own use, subject to limits of course.

Several factors influenced the approval of the draft. Coalition political pressure was not the only driving force behind cannabis legalisation, although it could be said that it was essential to fulfil the coalition agreement that their programme included the legalisation of marijuana. In addition, the parties had to take account of the changing public opinion, as society seemed to be becoming more liberal and they did not want to lose the trust of the electorate. Mostly young people supported the cannabis bill, disagreeing with the harsh condemnation of consumers. Year after year, there was more controversy because they believed that prohibition had not fulfilled the faith they had in it, as marijuana consumption had not decreased because of prohibition. The black market continued to flourish and police work multiplied. The German Government says the policy of prohibition has failed.

SPD health minister Karl Lauterbach said the ban was 'damaging'. Despite this, as a doctor, he does not support the use of marijuana, he does not encourage society to take the substance, his aim is to bring about a health policy reform in which the use of cannabis is more transparent, controlled and sanitary (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit 2025; Federal Government 2024). This kind of change was also desired by other countries and thus probably indirectly influenced German thinking. As a kind of international pressure, several countries within the European Union, such as Malta, Luxembourg and Germany have legalised cannabis, in addition to the U.S., Canada and Uruguay, and even Chechnya has already passed a law on cannabis consumption (EMCDDA 2023).

In 2021, Malta became the first EU country to pass a law on the legal consumption of cannabis, allowing people over 18 to possess 7 grams of marijuana for personal use and 4 shrubs for cultivation, and up to 25 grams of dried product. Members of the Cannabis

Social Club, a non-profit community distribution club, may consume 7 grams of cannabis per day and 50 grams per month. However, they are not allowed to smoke pot in public places because they have to pay a high fine and can be fined if they exceed the limit. According to the Eurobarometer survey, cannabis use will have decreased by 2024. The law was adopted to curb the illegal market and drug-related crime and to protect consumers more effectively (NORMAN 2024).

Luxembourg is a year ahead of Germany in legalising cannabis, having approved a draft law in 2023 that allows consumers over 18 to consume, possess and grow 4 cannabis plants for recreational use in their own households. However, use in public places is still prohibited, and if they violate it, they can be fined or prosecuted and even imprisoned, depending on the quantity (NORMAN 2025). The Luxembourg decision has also had a major impact on German decision making, as it crossed the Rubicon. The law was adopted in order to curb the illegal market and drug-related crime, and to protect consumers more effectively.

Among the countries surrounding Germany in Central Europe, the Czech Republic was the pioneer of decriminalisation from the East, who have for 15 years pursued liberal policies that are seen as tolerant of drug users and seem to work without extra social disruption. In several cases, the Germans cite the Czechs as having to find a middle ground between prohibition and excessive liberalism. The use of cannabis has been decriminalised in the Czech Republic. They requested an amendment to the Penal Code, which was adopted on 30 May 2025. Under the changes, Czechs will soon be able to keep 25 grams of cannabis outside their homes and grow 3 hemp plants at home, but can have up to 100 grams of dried hemp per household (VALDOVINOS 2025). Of course, deviations from these quantities, depending on the difference, will either result in a misdemeanour for Czech citizens or a prison sentence of between 1 and 3 years. They are aiming for the law to come into force in January next year, which they expect to generate billions of euros in revenue, and they also want to see a reduction in the burden on prisons (ČIHÁK et al. 2025). They also plan to set up cannabis clubs, selling strictly controlled, quality products.

In addition to these countries, other countries may have shaped the German way of thinking. In the Netherlands, neighbouring Germany, coffeeshops have been operating for several years, where consumers over the age of 18 who are Dutch residents or live there legally can buy marijuana for themselves (Niederlande 2025). Users have to register and can buy 5 grams of marijuana in a coffeeshop, which can have a maximum of 2,000 members. Under the regulations, possession, production and distribution of marijuana consumed outside a coffee shop is a criminal offence. However, the consumption of drugs by persons over the age of 18 is not a criminal offence, so in principle consumption on the street is a maximum offence. Their drug policy focuses on crime prevention and harm reduction as a primary objective. In 2023, the Netherlands also launched a pilot programme to legalise both cultivation and consumption. Licensed growers will supply the products to coffee shops, giving consumers access to controlled, quality-clean products. They also hope to curb the black market. Last year, more cities joined the programme, which is expected to run for 4 years. Depending on the results, the government may decide to make changes. Dutch political parties are more or less unhappy with the current situation, with the far-right wanting to close coffee shops and return to a total ban.

The Germans also saw the downsides of the Dutch model, with problems in tourism and a boom in illegal trade, and they wanted to see a stricter system implemented.

Switzerland also seems to be opening up to legalisation. As a first step, in 2021, pilot projects were launched to allow people who register for this programme to consume cannabis in a regulated way, with access to it in pharmacies or social clubs (Federal Office of Public Health 2021). The cannabis purchased there is a clean and controlled product. In February 2025, a parliamentary committee in Switzerland tabled a bill that would allow the consumption, purchase, possession and cultivation of cannabis, albeit within strict limits. Among their main proposals is that 3 hemp plants could be cultivated for personal use only. Consumers would have access to the drug in non-profit and public shops, which would be fully compliant with quality standards and sell strictly controlled products. Persons who use cannabis would not be allowed to drive a motor vehicle, as there would be a zero tolerance regulation for consumers.

Of course, the counter-example is also a model, since France also strictly punishes recreational cannabis use, but has one of the highest rates of use in Europe. Since 2021, they have also had an experiment testing the effects of medical cannabis. In conclusion, both positive and negative examples have influenced Germany's decision-making, and their decision was taken in a European context.

This decision marked a milestone as the social debate over the liberalisation of drug policy intensified. The German Government wanted to further protect young users from various synthetic substances and dangerous drug use, to curb the black market and, last but not least, to strengthen social control. Will legalisation be a success? Has it really had the desired effect so far, or have new problems arisen? The law strictly regulated age, quantity and access to the drug.

In Germany, cannabis has been removed from the list of prohibited substances in the Drugs Act and the following have been allowed under partial legalisation (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit 2025).

- People can keep 50 grams of dried cannabis and 3 cannabis plants for their own consumption at home.
- There is also a limit on the amount of cannabis that can be possessed in public by people over 18 years of age, up to a maximum of 25 grams.
- You can order cannabis seeds from EU Member States for home cultivation.
- Community clubs have also been set up to share the consumption of the substance.

Social and political pressure

What prompted Germany to legalise cannabis? It was probably indirect social and political pressure that led to the change in legislation, as society seemed to be moving towards more liberal thinking and the example of several other countries was also putting pressure on German politics. The ban continued to be ineffective, and the coalition government was also committed to legalising cannabis, so it became almost inevitable that they would move in this direction. First, a strictly regulated, partial liberalisation of cannabis was

achieved through the establishment of a tiered system and political compromise, as cannabis clubs do not operate on a commercial basis. The German Government has decided that marijuana use cannot be completely banned. The goal of the police and law enforcement is to ensure the safety of citizens (FÓRIZS–LIPPAI 2025). The decision to legalise cannabis is a move towards putting cannabis use in a safe framework and protecting its citizens, as it is one of the most commonly consumed substances in their country. The idea that society is moving towards decriminalisation is gaining ground.

However, the German Ministry of Health has also pointed out that cannabis use can be harmful, especially for people with mental illness and for young people and young adults. The focus remains on effective prevention (SZENT-IVÁNYI 2022). The basis of their programme is to communicate openly about the health problems caused by cannabis and to get this across to the general population through a campaign. Health is the most important thing. One of the biggest problems is the consumption of cannabis obtained illegally, mostly on the black market, as most of the time it is uncontrolled and often combined with dangerous substances. Consumption of unclean cannabis can cause serious problems and can be particularly harmful to health. The government believes partial legalisation is a safer alternative.

For years, the justice system has been burdened by the criminal prosecution of cannabis-related offences. It is believed that partial legalisation will reduce the burden on police officers, freeing them to work less on crimes caused by drug users and freeing them to spend more time on other cases.

Trends

Firstly, it can be demonstrated that, looking at the period from 2023 onwards, consumption rates will continue to rise. The number of young people who have consumed cannabis at least once in their lives has increased. At the level of experimentation, marijuana consumption has also become more popular among young adults (aged 18–29) (KARACHALIOU et al. 2024). To a lesser extent, however, there has also been a change in the 30–45 age group, which shows an upward trend. According to the Centre for Monitoring Drug Use, which monitors annual drug use, people continue to use cannabis rather than synthetic drugs.

In addition to the change in rates, not only has the number of users changed, but the frequency of cannabis use has also increased. Daily use is characterised by a small increase in rates, while regular users are gradually increasing, meaning that they use the drug several times a week, almost doubling in 2 years. Among young adults, many use marijuana at least once a week (Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung 2024).

I wonder what motivates Germans to try marijuana and consume cannabis. EMCDDA surveys, among others, have shown that several factors influence the use of cannabis (EMCDDA 2024). In the first place, young people are driven by the desire to experience new things and by curiosity. They are not familiar with marijuana and do not have full information about its effects and the consequences of its use. Then, marijuana is used recreationally, i.e. for recreational purposes, most often at a party or a gathering of

friends. They want to relax because in many cases they feel that they are under too much pressure, even at school level. The reason behind it is that it reduces stress and relieves tension in people. High expectations, test papers, exams, pressure at work can prove too much. Closely related to these facts is the fact that sleep problems, the treatment of sleep disorders and, last but not least, but still not least, the use of cannabis for medical purposes is aimed at relieving chronic pain. In the months following partial legalisation, curiosity has been the main focus, while the use of the drug to solve problems and for stress is increasing.

Licensing has also brought some changes in consumption patterns. However, the most popular form of consumption is still the classic “joint” (weed cigarette). More than three quarters of users use cannabis in this way. However, new vaporisation systems are emerging, which promise a much healthier way of consumption, as the THC in the plant is not ingested by the user after combustion, but by vaporisation from the plant, which does not produce tar. In this way, less of the harmful substance is introduced into the body during consumption. It is also worth mentioning the consumption in edible form, such as cakes or sweets, but this is still a rare practice in Germany.

The nature of cannabis consumption venues has changed. Three-quarters of users consume marijuana mainly at home, in other private residences, or in the company of friends. Despite the fact that it has always been illegal to consume cannabis in public places, and within 100 metres of kindergartens, schools and sports facilities, many people still use marijuana in public places (Deutschlandfunk 2024). In the initial phase, it appears that there are still unresolved issues, as cannabis clubs are not functioning as planned, as they are still not very popular, have limited membership, and, due to the slow issuance of licenses, there are currently only about 200 cannabis clubs in Germany.

Regional differences can also be observed within Germany. In large cities such as Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne, the proportion of consumers is significantly higher than in rural areas.

However, in certain areas of eastern Germany, the increase in consumption has not been as spectacular so far. In contrast, the data recorded in the western provinces show high values, probably due to the drug policy across the border.

The main aim of legalisation is to curb the trade in drugs from illegal sources in Germany. However, the figures for the first year of legalisation do not show this. The German Police Federation (DPolG) states in a report at the end of 2024 that the volume of black market trade has increased by approximately 20% (Deutsche Polizeigewerkschaft im DBB 2025). The lack of licensed shops and growers' circles means that market demand cannot be met. Slow licensing processes continue to drive consumers towards illegal procurement. Many people still obtained the substance from illegal sources in 2024. One of the most important goals of the regulation is to curb the black market as much as possible and reduce easy access to illegal substances.

The illicit market has also adapted quickly to the changes that legalisation has brought, as it can offer psychoactive substances at a significantly lower price than legal products. The wide range of products available is also on the side of the illegal traders, both in terms of strength and choice (e.g. indica, sativa, hybrid varieties) (EMCDDA 2024). The shopping process is also consumer-friendly, with no lengthy registration

process like in legal shops or clubs. Quality risk is a factor in the black market that many people do not take into account (EMCDDA 2024). Its place of origin and purity are often unknown. Laboratory tests have shown that illegally sourced products contain various contaminants such as pesticides and fungal toxins. In addition, the THC content of these dubious-source drugs is extremely high, which is very dangerous as it increases the risk of psychosis and anxiety disorders, especially in younger consumers.

Due to the fledgling licensing system, the situation for the police has also become more complicated as a result of the changed circumstances. This is because partial legalisation has created a legal gray area, which makes it difficult to take clear action against the black market (Südwestrundfunk 2025). Although it is legal to possess a small amount of legally obtained drugs, possession or trafficking of drugs in excess of the specified amount will still result in retaliation. The purchase and distribution of a black market drug remains a criminal offence. According to Ralf Kusterer, President of the German Police Union (DPolG), illegal drug trafficking on the black market continues to flourish. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the authorities to prove whether or not the origin of a drug is legal. The Vice-President of the German Federal Police Union believes that this law will not only reduce the workload of the police, but will also increase the burden. According to Alexander Poitz, police officers will not be able to say exactly how pure the drug is, how many grams of cannabis are involved, or how far away marijuana users are from the institutions (Deutsche Polizeigewerkschaft im DBB 2025).

The German police are concerned about the cannabis law not only because of the black market, but also because of the increase in traffic accidents. For road traffic, 3.5 nanograms per millilitre of tetrahydrocannabinol is allowed, and if this limit is exceeded, a fine of €500 and/or a one-month driving ban can be imposed (EMCDDA 2025).

Bayerischer Rundfunk reported that the Munich police have reported an increase of more than 50% in the number of road traffic accidents where THC content was involved (Bavarian State Ministry of the Interior, Sport and Integration 2024). The number of THC-related accidents is also on the rise in most provinces, but there are still many more fatal accidents under the influence of alcohol. The combined consumption of alcohol and cannabis is particularly dangerous, so cannabis users are prohibited from driving under the influence of alcohol. In addition, of course, newly-licensed drivers and young drivers under the age of 21 are not allowed to consume cannabis at all.

Protection of minors will remain a priority, as has been the case so far, but research has shown that preventive information in schools is no longer sufficient, as the number of underage consumers continues to rise. Prevention programmes are being transformed, trying to build on a more complex, comprehensive strategy to ensure that people have access to timely and relevant information and to focus on developing young people's resilience (Deutsche Polizeigewerkschaft im DBB 2025). It can lead to serious health and social problems if young people are already turning to drugs to feel better or to reduce stress.

Under the new regulations, access to medical cannabis has been modified so that doctors can prescribe it via e-prescription, even based on an online consultation (BURK-SCHOPPE 2025). This is a difficult decision for healthcare professionals, as doctors are not always able to determine whether patients really need cannabis for therapeutic purposes

or not. As for the future, it is unclear where this process will lead and how it will affect healthcare.

Of course, despite the many questions and negative statements, the positive effects of marijuana legalisation could be seen in several areas in Germany, as there are two sides to every coin. First of all, curbing drug trafficking is one of the main goals, which will take several years to achieve. Partial legalisation could reduce the number of drugs purchased on the illegal market, because over time it will become important for consumers to buy and consume products from legal sources and of controlled quality. If this regulation achieves this effect, it will become more difficult for criminal organisations to operate. In such cases, police resources could be freed up, as criminal proceedings for marijuana possession would decrease, placing less burden on the police and allowing them to focus more attention on more serious crimes.

The regulation could change not only the work of police officers, but also that of doctors. Safer consumption would also reduce the risk of harm to patients' health due to controlled quality substances, as the product they purchase would not be contaminated with various substances. In addition, providing patients with professional information could help them avoid regular consumption of the drug, which could prevent addiction. Furthermore, according to several studies, the medical use of cannabis alleviates pain and can be a cure for various diseases. Changes may occur outside the judicial and healthcare sectors, and partial legalisation may even create new jobs, as this new industry could open new doors for the pharmaceutical industry, the commercial sector and logistics. In addition, the state could also benefit from this legalisation in the future, as it can expect revenue from taxes, which, if used wisely, could be reinvested in healthcare and prevention.

Conclusion

The partial legalisation in Germany has led to serious debates within political parties. Some parties believe that it was a mistake to introduce this regulation and would opt for stricter measures, while others believe that time will solve the problem, as this one year has proven to be too short and this regulation may even lead to positive changes in the future. The reasons and objectives are important, namely to curb the black market, increase social control and, of course, protect consumers, but the regulation still needs to be refined. Based on research, reports, studies and articles published since 2023, it can be observed that the initial problems associated with partial legalisation exist in Germany just as they did in Canada and the United States. Even before the licence was granted in Germany, there was a growing trend toward a thriving black market and problems in various areas, such as increasing prevalence, which is unlikely to change or be eliminated within a year, but the desired effect is expected to be achieved in the long term. In order for the legal market to expand, time, energy, traders and logistics are needed, which is a long-term process.

In Canada, it has been shown after several years that consumption habits and health indicators have changed. It is very difficult to find a balance between the expanding legal

market and the suppression of the black market, and to determine the extent of the health risks involved and how quickly this can be achieved.

According to DEBRA's research, there was no change in cannabis use in 2024, while EMCDDA research shows that consumption is increasing (DEBRA 2024). More and more young people are trying the drug, and the black market continues to flourish. Germans tend to support the partial legalisation of cannabis. According to a survey conducted by the Forsa polling institute, more than half of the respondents (55%) do not want the cannabis law to be repealed, while 36% would support its repeal (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2025).

Furthermore, questions arise as to where the increase in the use of medical cannabis will lead, given that after a telemedical consultation, doctors can prescribe cannabis for medical use, which patients can obtain from pharmacies or even by mail order (BURK-SCHOPPE 2025).

Political debates on the partial legalisation of cannabis in Germany are likely to continue in the future. In the long term, it remains to be seen whether the German state will want to change the regulations and possibly make them more effective, as well as successfully develop a drug policy that will be sustainable in the future.

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