

# GANJA GAMES

Press claims that the 'Lambeth experiment' on cannabis resulted in soaring rates of hospital admissions for Class A drugs were wafer-thin on evidence. By Max Daly.

In April, two national newspapers declared that research proved a softer approach to policing cannabis under Labour in the 2000s ramped up drug use, crime and hospital admissions.

The *Daily Mail* headlined its piece: 'The price of going soft on cannabis: Labour's experiment 'pushed up hard drug use and crime'. The same day, two *Daily Telegraph* headlines declared not only that 'Cannabis use soared by a quarter after Class C downgrade', but also that 'Softly softly cannabis scheme drove up hospital admissions for hard drugs'.

The "going soft" policies that the papers referred to were the 2001 'Lambeth Experiment', overseen by Commander Brian Paddick, to stop arresting people for simple cannabis possession (in order to focus on crack and heroin dealers) and the declassification of cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug in 2004.

However, all the evidence to date on the impact of these policies had shown a very different picture from that presented by the newspapers, in fact quite the opposite. Criminologists were intrigued and not a little suspicious that only these papers carried the stories.

So what were these stories based on? Despite the fact the *Daily Mail* described them as "two major research studies", the sources for the stories were two unpublished research papers

presented to the Royal Economic Society. Unfortunately, one is seriously flawed while the other remains unfinished and is confusing.

The first paper, *Policing cannabis and drug related hospital admissions: evidence from administrative records*, claims that the Lambeth Experiment raised hospital admission rates for hard drugs between 2001 and 2002. But as Alex Stevens, Criminologist Professor at the University of Kent points out, this is "a huge claim" which does not stand up to any scrutiny at all.

## A PERFECT STORM OF SHAKY OR INCOMPLETE RESEARCH AND SENSATIONALIST REPORTING

For example, did hospitals in other inner city boroughs see a similar increase in Class A drug admissions? The research does not say. Nor could you glean from the research how a reduction in the classification for cannabis could relate to rising hospital admissions for cocaine.

The second paper, *Cannabis consumption, crime and victimization – evidence from the 2004 cannabis declassification in the UK*, says in its front

page abstract that "declassification increased cannabis consumption by 25% for previous non-consumers relative to previous consumers". Like anyone else, the reporters, rushed as they probably were, should have checked out the muddled meaning of that sentence with the authors of the report – and also taken heed of the two national surveys that provide by far the most reliable information about trends in cannabis use.

The *British Crime Survey* and the *Survey of Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England* found that cannabis use had fallen from 11 per cent of adults and 13 per cent of children before the declassification, to eight per cent and nine per cent respectively. "It is very hard to square these reductions with a claim that the changes in 2004 caused cannabis use to rise," said Professor Stevens.

In fact, one of the reports authors, Dr Nils Braakmann, sought to distance himself from the newspapers' take on his research, saying that that his research "does not demonstrate an absolute increase among people who previously did not consume cannabis."

Ewan Hoyle, of the Liberal Democrats for Drug Policy Reform, accurately summed up the stories in an article on politics.co.uk as "a perfect storm of shaky or incomplete research and sensationalist reporting".