Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences

journal homepage: http://kjss.kasetsart.org

The politics of Cannabis: Policies and their impact on youth: A case study in Phitsanulok province, Thailand

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Article Info

Article history:
Received 11 November 2024
Revised 07 February 2025
Accepted 13 February 2025
Available online 21 May 2026

Keywords:
cannabis legalization Thailand,
cannabis policy impacts,
government cannabis control,
Thailand drug regulation gaps,
youth cannabis prevention

Abstract

This study utilizes qualitative research methods to examine the political aspects of cannabis legalization in Thailand, with an emphasis on its effects on youth in Phitsanulok Province after the drug policy changes implemented in 2021. The data collection process included a thorough examination of pertinent documents, literature, and interviews conducted with four primary groups: government officials, educators, youth representatives, and community members. Semi-structured interviews and content analysis were employed to collect and analyze findings. The research indicates that the cannabis legalization policy in Thailand was developed through political negotiations under the administration of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. The recent policy change, especially the decision to remove cannabis from the controlled substances list, has initiated considerable social discourse. Cannabis presents acknowledged medical advantages; however, the current regulatory framework falls short in effectively overseeing its recreational use. The temporary guidelines issued by the Ministry of Public Health have been inadequate, leading to greater access and usage among young individuals, which negatively impacts their health, education, and family dynamics. Additionally, legal loopholes impede efficient state oversight. The study highlights the critical necessity for thorough legislation, particularly the swift enactment of the Cannabis and Hemp Act. Recommendations encompass enhanced packaging and advertising regulations, initiatives to raise public awareness regarding legal risks, and measures aimed at safeguarding youth. The implementation of these measures is essential for addressing social impacts, harmonizing cannabis regulation with national drug policies, and promoting a balanced approach to cannabis use in Thailand.

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https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2026.47.2.12
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Introduction

The removal of cannabis off Thailand's drugs list has sparked a debate over its suitability and raised worries about the adverse effects of cannabis consumption. Several nations have initiated pilot programs to evaluate the use of cannabis for recreational reasons, although several others continue to impose regulations on it (Thai PBS, 2022). At present, several countries have completely legalized cannabis, while 69 countries, including 36 percent of 193 nations, have partially legalized it. Examples include Canada, Uruguay, Georgia, and South Africa, which possess legislation permitting the use of cannabis for both medicinal and recreational uses (Thai Post, 2022). Currently, the United States and several other nations authorize the use of cannabis for medicinal and recreational uses under conditions or inside designated states. Moreover, projections indicate that by 2025, the global medicinal cannabis industry may attain a valuation of 1.9 to 2.1 trillion baht. Considering this circumstance, researchers express apprehension over the potential societal difficulties that may emerge from permitting the use of "recreational cannabis" (Pankaeo, 2022). The cannabis legalization policy was a primary platform of the Bhumjaithai Party during the March 2019 general election for the House of Representatives in Thailand. The Bhumjaithai Party declared their campaign slogans: "Thai cannabis may be cultivated freely" and "A poverty-reducing plant, a new economic crop, unrestricted cannabis" (Pankaeo, 2022). The primary focus of the strategy proposed by the Bhumjaithai Party was to highlight cannabis as an economic crop and to advance medicinal expertise. This policy was enacted following the Bhumjaithai Party's coalition with the Palang Pracharath Party, led by Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, with Anutin Charnvirakul of the Bhumjaithai Party appointed as Minister of Public Health. Subsequently, it became well recognized by the public as the "free cannabis policy" (Kanjanasiripan, 2022; Lertbamrungchai, 2023). The authors indicate that the present availability of free cannabis is influenced by political factors that facilitate access to political power and negotiation, culminating in the establishment of the free cannabis policy. This has sparked a societal debate concerning the regulation of cannabis trade and usage, following its removal from the state's drug legislation.

Concerning the issue of cannabis and youth in Phitsanulok province, data from the Northern Youth Health Promotion Network and the Young Phitsanulok Forum, in conjunction with the Child and Youth Council, child, youth, family organizations, and civil society entities in the lower northern region, convened a forum entitled "Youth and Cannabis... Trends, Issues, and Solutions" (The Coverage Movement, 2022; Thammajai, 2022). The panel emphasized that the removal of cannabis off the narcotics list, along with the absence of regulatory legislation, has resulted in uninformed youngsters experimenting with cannabis. This encompasses inadvertent ingestion via food, where the quantity of Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) remains unspecified. Furthermore, children and adolescents lack a comprehensive understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of cannabis, yet they are procuring and using it independently, so endangering themselves and society. The 2022 annual report from the Phisanulok Provincial Health Office indicates that hazards associated with cannabis for adolescents encompass production, particularly due to the illicit cultivation of narcotic plants in the Phrom Phiram, Wang Thong, and Chat Trakan districts. The primary narcotic plants comprise kratom and fresh cannabis. Drug proliferation persists in the community or Heartland regions, notably in Phitsanulok city and Bang Rakam district. The prominent substances include methamphetamine, cannabis, crystal meth, and inhalants. Between 2014 and 2021, over 4,389 individuals had therapy. From 2014 to 2021, the overall number of teenagers aged 12–24 who were addicted to drugs reached 4,769, including 463 individuals particularly hooked on cannabis (Noosorn & Petchpoom, 2016; Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office, 2022; Puanpanwong, 2024).

This research study was done to address the problem of cannabis legalization and its effects on children, as outlined in the preceding discussion. This study analyzes the effects of cannabis legalization on teenagers in Phitsanulok Province subsequent to the alterations in drug policies and legislation in 2021.

Objective

1. The aim is to analyze the situation regarding cannabis issues in the political dimension under the legalization of cannabis policy following the changes in drug policies and laws in the year 2021.

2. The aim is to examine how the legalization of cannabis affects young people in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand, after the changes in drug policies and laws in 2021.

Literature Review

For the literature review and related research in this study, the authors conducted a survey to provide an overview of previous research on cannabis legalization policies, both within Thailand and internationally. This examination aims to clarify how this study aligns with or differs from existing research on this topic. The author's findings are summarized as follows.

The literature review in this study explores the political dimensions of cannabis policy, both in Thailand and internationally, to provide insight into past research on cannabis legalization. Key studies reveal both support for and opposition to cannabis policy shifts, reflecting diverse political interests and ideological motivations. Srisukshayoakul (2021) argues that Thailand's cannabis policy aims to attract electoral support by positioning cannabis within public health and economic frameworks, especially promoting medical cannabis and agricultural development. In contrast, Pankaeo (2022) views the Bhumjaithai Party's "free cannabis" slogan as a populist strategy to gain electoral prominence, offering a unique political appeal and positioning the party as critical to forming a coalition government. Although Bhumjaithai's policies originally promoted cannabis as a major economic crop, their implementation shifted to medical use due to government constraints. Jae-o and Techophisanwong (2021) take a broader view in their study on cannabis myths and public knowledge, describing how state-driven narratives have framed cannabis as a dangerous drug since 1925. This ideological stance has influenced public perception and policy, casting cannabis as a controlled substance and reinforcing negative stereotypes through various institutions. Chusakulnitisin (2011) and Kammul and Dansikaew (2019) addresses cannabis policy from a political economy perspective, identifying four main interest groups: medical, recreational, political, and economic cannabis advocates. She suggests that Thailand's regulatory approach, including the Ministry of Public Health's continued designation of cannabis as a narcotic, reflects a complex power dynamic involving public, private, and community interests. The study also considers foreign perspectives. Lenton (2004) highlights the role of political actors in cannabis law reform in Western Australia, while Riboulet-Zemouli et al. (2021) emphasize the World Health Organization's involvement in re-evaluating cannabis as a controlled substance. Adams et al. (2021) examine how the emerging cannabis industry influences policy by lobbying for legal reforms, supporting NGOs, and collaborating with academia in New Zealand.

This review reflects that cannabis policy is closely tied to political agendas across different contexts. Consequently, this study synthesizes these insights to analyze Thailand's free-cannabis policy after the 2021 drug policy reform, with a focus on the policy's political, economic, and social impacts, especially on youth in Phitsanulok. It further examines government measures, educational initiatives, and community involvement in managing youth risks related to cannabis legalization.

Methodology

This research article utilizes qualitative research methodology. The aim of this study is to provide a political science framework that analyzes governmental measures, educational institutions, and civil society involvement in mitigating and reducing risks to youth in Phitsanulok Province associated with the effects of cannabis legalization policy following the 2021 modifications in drug policy and legislation. The research process encompasses: (1) the gathering of pertinent documentary and literature sources, including official documents, books, relevant literature, research reports, textbooks, research articles, and peer-reviewed academic journals; (2) fieldwork data collection, which involves conducting in-depth interviews. The Human Research Ethics Committee of Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, Thailand, reviewed and granted approval for this study on December 5, 2023, under ethics approval code PSRU-EC No.: 2023/046.

Participants

The authors identified a total of 34 participants, categorized into three groups, utilizing purposive sampling based on criteria pertinent to their roles in connection with this study, with each participant voluntarily consenting to provide information. The participant groups included: (1) seven government officials, (2) nine representatives from educational institutions, (3) nine community youth representatives, and (4) nine members from the community.

Data Collection

The authors utilized an interview form for data collection, employing an in-depth interview approach with a semi-structured format. The interview questions were customized for each participant group, enabling adjustments in the interview guide based on the distinct

roles of the informants. The study also included secondary data derived from a comprehensive review, synthesis, and analysis of multiple sources, such as documents, books, pertinent literature, research reports, textbooks, research articles, peer-reviewed academic journals, and relevant materials from both public and private sectors.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was performed through content analysis, involving a comprehensive examination of interview data, field notes, and synthesized information from relevant documents and research studies, utilizing methodological triangulation. This method facilitated the categorization, selection, and synthesis of data gathered from interviews, notes, and literature review of pertinent research. The findings were subsequently presented in a descriptive manner, offering a comprehensive narrative of the content and insights obtained from the research (Pounpunwong, 2023).

Results

Analyze The Situation Regarding Cannabis issues in The Political Dimension Under the Legalization of Cannabis Policy Following the Changes in Drug Policies and Laws in The Year 2021

This study's findings indicate that the ongoing cannabis legalization movement in Thailand is situated within a political context characterized by the pursuit and negotiation of political power. The implementation of cannabis legalization under the Prayut Chan-o-cha administration has sparked significant social debate concerning the regulation of cannabis, especially regarding its sale and usage. In light of the recent removal of cannabis from the state's list of controlled substances, this policy direction has been established. The author presents the findings in the following manner:

1) The cannabis legalization policy was officially initiated in 2019, with the Bhumjaithai Party utilizing it as a central component of their election campaign (Pankaeo, 2022). The policy advocated for cannabis as a promising economic crop for Thailand, drawing inspiration from international research on the medical advantages of cannabis and acknowledging Thailand's favorable conditions for its cultivation, which produces potent and beneficial extracts. As a result, the policy promoted government backing for cannabis cultivation for medical purposes, commonly referred to as the "Cannabis Legalization" policy, featuring the slogans 'The Crop to End Poverty for Thai People' and 'Cannabis: The New Economic Crop.' The policy was officially announced by Bhumjaithai Party Secretary-General Saksayam Chidchob on January 17, 2019, drawing inspiration from similar policies implemented in the United States (Bakal, 2023). In Thailand, households will be allowed to cultivate up to six cannabis plants, primarily aimed at supporting medical use through this legislation. In the meantime, various political parties have proposed policies concerning both medical and recreational cannabis use. The Democratic Party endorses the use of medical cannabis, while the Future Forward Party (Currently, the People's Party) advocates for cannabis for medical, tourism, and recreational applications. The Pheu Thai Party has concentrated on advancing hemp as an economic crop, emphasizing its medical applications rather than cannabis use. The Commoner's Party has put forward a more progressive cannabis policy, advocating for unrestricted cannabis cultivation and permitting market forces to dictate pricing (Kraiwijit, 2019).

In 2019, the Bhumjaithai Party became part of the Cabinet, collaborating with the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to advance the cannabis legalization policy as previously committed. Nonetheless, the implementation of the policy faced considerable criticism, attracting both support and opposition. In 2022, the Move Forward Party expressed criticism towards Bhumjaithai, specifically regarding its involvement in the Ministry of Public Health. The party accused Bhumjaithai of facilitating cannabis use beyond medical applications, suggesting that this could lead to more harm than benefit for the nation. Their argument centered on the management of cannabis legalization by the Minister of Public Health, which they claimed resulted in a 'legal vacuum' following the removal of cannabis from the list of controlled substances, consequently leading to unintended and improper uses of cannabis. The Move Forward Party put forward a new cannabis bill, highlighting the following key points: 1) Restoring cannabis to its status as a controlled substance and rescinding the Ministry of Public Health's directive that classifies cannabis as a controlled herb. Maintaining cannabis as a controlled substance while removing any provisions in the cannabis bill that support monopolistic practices by large corporations. The Move Forward Party maintains that cannabis should remain classified as a controlled substance, adhering to the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, while permitting regulated medical applications. A systematic approach to the utilization of cannabis will be developed under this framework (Move Forward Party, 2022).

If we consider the above context, we find that the cannabis policy under the Prayut administration demonstrated that the government took proactive steps to promote cannabis as a medicinal plant. They supported its cultivation, distribution, and possession, framing it as an important economic crop. They emphasized the significance of fostering an understanding of cannabis as a 'medicinal herb' that deserves protection and conservation, in conjunction with the promotion of traditional Thai medical practices (Krueangsanuk et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the policy sparked considerable dialogue. Advocates argued that cannabis presented more benefits than drawbacks, particularly in the medical field, and urged for regulatory structures similar to those in place for alcohol and tobacco. Critics emphasized concerns regarding cannabis misuse and noted that Thailand's healthcare system, which consists of three separate systems—modern medicine, traditional Thai medicine, and local folk medicine lacked the necessary cohesion for effective cannabis regulation, potentially leading to adverse outcomes for patients (The Provincial Public Health Officer of Phitsanulok, personal communication, March 11, 2024).

2) Thailand's Narcotics Code Act, 2021, and cannabis regulation (Mahidol University, 2021) permits the importation of cannabis for medical applications or patient care. Individuals permitted to utilize cannabis under this Act encompass: Government entities engaged in medical, pharmaceutical, scientific, or agricultural education and research; personnel delivering medical, pharmaceutical, scientific, or agricultural services for medical, pharmaceutical, or scientific objectives; and agencies accountable for drug prevention, suppression, and rehabilitation, patients in need of cannabis for critical treatment, alongside the stipulations outlined in the Narcotics Code Act of 2021, (Chiangrang & Muangtham, 2021). In her study, Henprasert (2023) identifies challenges in the enforcement of the Narcotics Code Act of 2021, emphasizing that the law alters the perception of cannabis users, recognizing them as patients rather than offenders. This change introduces ambiguity in enforcement practices; treating users as patients suggests an emphasis on rehabilitation rather than punishment. However, the treatment process is not clearly defined, resulting in a 'legal vacuum' where it is uncertain whether genuine rehabilitation efforts are being executed.

Furthermore, Cannabis legalization, highlighting the establishment of the Cannabis Institute. This institute operates to promote medical cannabis policy, working in conjunction with networks outside the Ministry of Public Health (Dontumprai et al., 2021). Three mechanisms have been identified in this approach: structuring regulations to facilitate implementation, conducting research, and disseminating accurate information (Dawrueang & Naluang, 2023). A dual-level development plan has been introduced, addressing both household and national levels, with strategies to integrate upstream, midstream, and downstream stages for cannabis production, distribution, and export (Hanphichai, 2021).

3) An Examination of the Draft Cannabis and Hemp Act: Risks to Youth in a Legal Void: This study analyzes the effects of Thailand's cannabis legalization on youth safety, highlighting the regulatory gaps present in the current Cannabis and Hemp Act. Chanthawongsa (2022) identifies two key issues arising from the removal of cannabis from the Narcotics Code: the enhancement of public freedom and the safeguarding of youth. Freedom relates to economic opportunities for the public and businesses through cannabis; however, safety concerns emerge due to risks such as second-hand smoke, inadvertent consumption of cannabis-infused products, and health issues for vulnerable groups including children and adolescents (Khongcharoensombat, 2019; Wiriyanupappong & Watcharasit, 2023).

The absence of thorough cannabis regulations presently facilitates significant youth access, resulting in a rise in recreational use rather than medical purposes (iLaw, 2022). The Royal College of Pediatricians of Thailand reports a tenfold increase in cannabis use among youth since legalization, with cannabis flower buds being openly sold and easily accessible to individuals under 20 (Atsanangkornchai et al., 2023; Eowratnavadi, 2020). The Ministry of Public Health has issued announcements to address cannabis-related nuisances; however, these temporary measures do not possess the necessary scope to guarantee comprehensive protection for youth.

Four essential factors influence youth accessibility: (1) home cultivation with inadequate restrictions, (2) insufficient packaging controls, (3) minimal advertising regulations, and (4) lack of public possession limits. Local authorities indicate that in the absence of regulatory guidelines, young individuals often encounter cannabis products in settings that do not ensure secure handling or oversight (The Provincial Public Health Officer of Phitsanulok, personal communication, March 11, 2024). Field data indicate that recreational cannabis use is prevalent among youth in both urban and rural settings, with students frequently consuming cannabis in conjunction with other substances such as kratom. Reports from the Deputy Governor of Phitsanulok highlight that current access has expanded beyond medical oversight,

indicating that cannabis has transitioned into a social substance rather than remaining a regulated treatment (Phitsanulok Provincial Office, 2023).

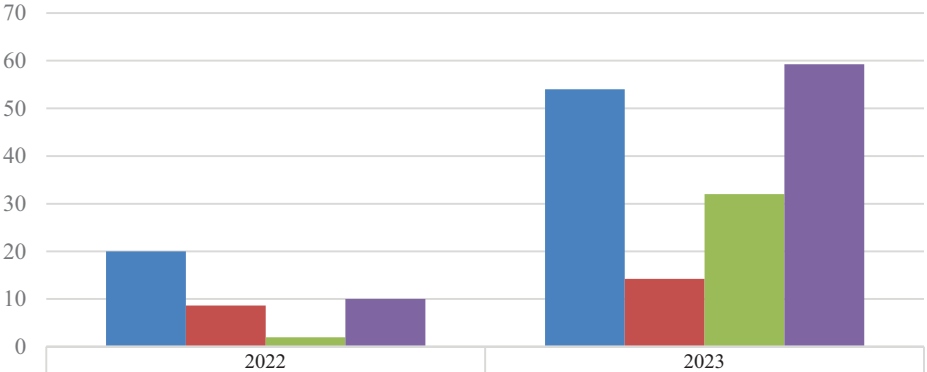
The authors argues that although cannabis legalization aims to capitalize on the economic and health advantages of the plant, insufficient regulation increases risks for young individuals. Refining legislation is crucial for tackling these social impacts, igniting continuous public discourse regarding the potential reinstatement of cannabis under The Narcotics Code Act, 2021, accompanied by enhanced protections for youth (Director of the ONCB Region 6 Office, personal communication, February 22, 2024).

The Impact of The Cannabis Legalization Policy on Youth Following the Change in Drug Policies and Laws in 2021 in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand

The authors have found a legal gap arising from alterations in drug policy and legislation in 2021, specifically concerning juvenile access to cannabis. The investigation of the effects of the free cannabis policy on youth in Phitsanulok province has been necessitated by deficiencies and inadequacies in the legislation that have influenced young individuals as a result of the policy. The authors analyze the effects of the free cannabis policy on adolescents in Phitsanulok province, drawing from data obtained through interviews and official papers from pertinent authorities, in light of the alterations in drug policies and legislation enacted in 2021.

1) Health impacts: The authors examined the yearly data from the Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office, which revealed a rising trend in cannabis consumption among adolescents aged 11–20. This information, sourced from Phutthachinnarat Hospital in Phitsanulok Province, is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates that in 2022, 20 individuals received cannabis therapy, representing 8.65 percent of total drug usage. Two additional patients constituted 10 percent. In 2023, the number of individuals receiving cannabis therapy rose to 54, representing 14.23 percent of total drug usage, with 32 new patients, or 59.26 percent. The data indicate that the incidence of new teenage cannabis users quintupled following the implementation of The Narcotics Code Act, 2021, compared to 2022. The motivations encompass curiosity and the perception of legality, facilitating unrestricted use and emulation as a trend, resulting in collective usage and influence. The extensive accessibility of establishments offering smoking paraphernalia and cannabis has promoted the onset of cannabis consumption among adolescents. Moreover, there is an issue with previous cannabis users resuming consumption owing to its illicit status. In 2023, it was discovered that 72.31 percent of former users who had consumed cannabis for over a year resumed its usage. Upon discharge from hospital treatment and into an environment where cannabis is readily available, patients face triggers that hinder cessation, leading to elevated stress levels for their family (Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office, 2022).



	2022	2023
Therapy recipient	20	54
Percentage	8.65	14.22
New therapy recipient	2	32
Percentage2	10	59.26

Figure 1 The situation of cannabis uses among youth in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand is a matter of concern, Adapted from the Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office

Furthermore, concerning juvenile access to cannabis in Phitsanulok province, a study from the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, area six (Phitsanulok), reveals that the lower northern area serves as a major conduit for drug trafficking from adjacent nations and domestically. Consequently, a risk associated with kids engaging in cannabis use has been present since prior to the implementation of cannabis legalization policies. In this region, underground recreational cannabis consumption has already occurred, particularly in the periphery. Between 2018 and 2022, cannabis ranked as the second most utilized substance after methamphetamine among drug users in Phitsanulok province, as seen by the subsequent statistics on cannabis users as shown in Table 1 (The District Chief Officer of Mueang Phitsanulok District, personal communication, March 15, 2024).

Table 1 The data for cannabis users in Phitsanulok province 2019–2023

Cannabis	2019 (people)	2020 (people)	2021 (people)	2022 (people)	2023 (people)
	118	129	102	68	46

Note: the authors

The data on cannabis users in Table 1 are inconsistent with the report from the Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office. This is due to the free cannabis policy established by the modifications in drug-related legislation in 2021, which reclassified cannabis as a non-narcotic. The primary regulating agency has transitioned from the Narcotics Control Office Region six (Phitsanulok) to the Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office. The aforementioned backdrop about cannabis usage statistics and the resultant health risks among youngsters, whether deliberate or inadvertent, pertains to the consumption of cannabis and cannabis-infused food items. The symptoms of cannabis therapy, as administered by the Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office from 2022 to 2023, indicate that addressing young cannabis addiction is very challenging and may need up to 14 days, in contrast to methamphetamine treatment. Prevalent health effects encompass drastic fluctuations in blood pressure, palpitations, changed mental states, hallucinations, both aural and visual, paranoia, and abrupt cognitive deterioration, which profoundly disrupts the brain, particularly in persons under 25 years of age. These health effects influence both physical and emotional well-being (Phitsanulok Provincial Public Health Office, 2022). Concerning educational institutions' perspectives on the health effects on adolescents, it is observed that in Phitsanulok Province, the utilization of cannabis for recreational reasons is categorized into two instances: 1. Urban regions, where cannabis accessibility is constrained by stringent regulatory oversight and its popularity is inferior to that of e-cigarettes. 2. In rural regions, interviews with school principals throughout several districts of Phitsanulok indicate that access to cannabis is derived from families and communities where it is cultivated and utilized as a normative practice, grounded in the traditional belief in the therapeutic benefits of plants. The interviews reveal that the health effects on kids present as lethargy and even hostile conduct in academic environments (The Principal of a School in Mueang District, Phitsanulok Province, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

2) The influence on education, derived from interviews with representatives of educational institutions, may be encapsulated in two instances: Adolescents hooked to cannabis exhibit a lack of enthusiasm in academic pursuits. In schools situated in the border regions of Phitsanulok province, it was observed that adolescents engage in cannabis usage, a behavior influenced by their familial and environmental contexts. Cannabis is readily available, as it is frequently grown within the community (Community youth representatives, personal communication, 2024). The state's inadequate regulation and the youth's view of cannabis as a plant rather than a drug exacerbate this problem. Youth in the districts of Chat Trakan, Nakhon Thai, Sappraiwan, and Wang Thong exhibited cannabis usage that impaired their ability to attend school, resulting in tiredness and violent conduct, as well as a fear of instructors and potential reporting by classmates to the school authorities (Principal, School in Mueang District, Phitsanulok Province, personal communication, 2024). Furthermore, the study interviews revealed that in instance 1, the influence of cannabis on adolescent education has compelled certain institutions to mandate that children either pause their studies or withdraw from school to get therapy. In scenario two, inside the realm of schools and educational institutions in the Muang district of Phitsanulok province, teenage behavior is characterized by the purchasing and selling of cannabis, as well as its concurrent use with other substances, including e-cigarettes and traditional cigarettes (The District Chief Officer of Mueang Phitsanulok District, personal communication, March 15, 2024). There are also concerns with congregating in rooms to use cannabis alongside other business networks, including the network of underage alcohol vendors engaged in prostitution (Director of the ONCB Region 6 Office, personal communication, February 22, 2024). Consequently, as a result of this lifestyle cycle,

several youths have disengaged from the educational system. These youths emphasize immediate financial gain over schooling, engaging in activities such as e-cigarette sales, online gambling, and prostitution (The Principal of a School in Mueang District, Phitsanulok Province, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

3) Family Impact**:** Interviews with representatives from schools and pertinent authorities in Phitsanulok province reveal a consensus. The proliferation of cannabis due to the liberal cannabis policy in Phitsanulok, especially its recreational usage, has a notable effect on the kids in the region the family unit. Parents and relatives of the kids often consume cannabis, frequently in conjunction with other narcotics, particularly across several districts. Interview findings suggest that the rationale for utilizing cannabis as a drug stem from the perception of cannabis as a natural remedy (Community youth representatives, personal communication, February 29, 2024). Consequently, when parents consume and produce cannabis at home, it prompts adolescents, who are predisposed to experiment with addictive drugs, to seize the chance to try it out of curiosity and imitative behavior. The ramifications of the cannabis legalization policy for teenagers, after the alteration of drug-related legislation in 2021 in Phitsanulok province, are that cannabis has been declassified as a narcotic. This has prompted certain parents to utilize cannabis, directly impacting the kids (Community members, personal communication, February 29, 2024). When adolescents engage in cannabis usage, the issue then reverts to the parents, who are compelled to seek therapy for the youngster, leading to forfeited educational possibilities. This ultimately results in several familial troubles, including financial difficulties, training and discipline challenges, criminal activities, and theft-related concerns, among others (The Principal of a School in Mueang District, Phitsanulok Province, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

Additionally, an examination of the effects of the cannabis legalization policy on youth following the alteration of drug policy and law in 2021 in Phitsanulok province reveals that social and cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the trend of cannabis use among young individuals. In conclusion, data gathered from interviews with pertinent agencies revealed the following issues. 1) Changes in social perception of cannabis: Following the legalization of cannabis, its societal image underwent a transformation, with favorable perceptions being shaped by media narratives and governmental policies that advocate for cannabis as both an economic asset and a medicinal resource. This change has resulted in some young individuals misinterpreting that cannabis is entirely legal and can be utilized for recreational purposes without any limitations. 2) The influence of family and community environment: The family plays a significant role in shaping youth behavior, particularly in contexts where parents or adult family members engage in cannabis use. This could result in young individuals being influenced and more inclined to engage in experimentation. In Phitsanulok province, access to cannabis has become more straightforward due to the presence of shops offering smoking equipment and cannabis products within the community, fostering an environment that may encourage cannabis consumption among young individuals. 3) The values and culture of peer groups: Young individuals are frequently impacted by their peers, especially in relation to engaging in risky behaviors like drug use. Peer pressure significantly influences youth to initiate cannabis use, particularly when such behavior is regarded as "acceptable" among friends or as a means of expressing social identity. Values associated with social acceptance and openness among certain youth groups may drive them to use cannabis as a means of connecting with peers or seeking validation (The Provincial Public Health Officer of Phitsanulok, personal communication, March 11, 2024).

The findings of this research indicate that social and cultural factors influence the trend of cannabis use among the youth in Phitsanulok Province. These factors underscore the necessity for enhanced regulatory measures to avert and address potential long-term effects on the youth.

Discussion

The Policy Regarding Cannabis Legalization Analyzing the 2021 Drug Policy Reform: Perspectives from the Political Aspect

This study examines cannabis legalization policy within the framework of political science, utilizing interest group and political party theories to assess the impact of key actors in policy formation. Interest groups, as articulated by scholars including Almond (1996), Easton (1957), Nimphanich (2004), and Apapirom (1999), are organizations formed around shared objectives and interests; however, they differ from political parties in that they do not aim to govern. Instead, their objective is to shape government policy to reflect their interests. This framework is essential for comprehending the political, economic, and social aspects of cannabis policy,

especially as it underscores the influence of political interests on the legalization of cannabis as a policy agenda.

The Bhumjaithai Party prominently featured cannabis legalization as a key campaign issue in the 2019 general elections. In its coalition role within the Prayut Chan-o-cha administration, Bhumjaithai promoted medical cannabis and cannabis cultivation, integrating these initiatives into the government's priority policies. On September 13, 2019, the party submitted two bills to parliament: an amendment to the Narcotic Drugs Act and a bill to establish a Thai Cannabis Institute, referred to as the "Six Plants Policy," aimed at permitting households to cultivate cannabis (Pankaeo, 2022). This development highlights the impact of political dynamics and interest groups on the formulation of cannabis policy. Following the implementation of The Narcotics Code Act, 2021, numerous government decrees have advocated for the potential advantages of cannabis. In 2022, cannabis was officially removed from the narcotics list and classified as a controlled herb by the Ministry of Public Health. These developments demonstrate a progression in Thai drug law, indicating a transition toward the legalization of cannabis. This study is consistent with Brans (2012) framework in Comparative Public Administration, recognizing political parties as institutionalized interest groups. Bhumjaithai, in conjunction with other parties such as Move Forward, Commoners, and the Democrats, has leveraged cannabis legalization as a campaign strategy. However, Bhumjaithai has emerged as the most vocal and prominent advocate for cannabis-related policies in its capacity at the Ministry of Public Health. This is consistent with the theories proposed by Rattanamongkolmas (1971), Friedrich (2017), and Finer (1941) regarding the significant roles of interest groups and political parties. It indicates that interest groups play a crucial role in shaping policy within democratic societies through advocacy and lobbying efforts. From a policy standpoint, cannabis has transitioned from criminalization to being recognized as a valuable medical resource. Eowratnavadi's (2020) research highlights the reframing of cannabis within political discourse as a medical asset, which has contributed to diminishing its criminal stigma and advancing decriminalization efforts (Photitan, 2007). The change in public discourse has enabled political parties to leverage medical cannabis as a campaign strategy, presenting it in a way that aligns with the public's healthcare priorities.

Upon examining the literature regarding cannabis policy after 2021, it is evident that cannabis continues to be a politically sensitive issue, functioning as both a strategic advantage for political parties and a significant concern for the public. The economic and social dimensions, along with global comparisons of cannabis policy, highlight important implications for health, the economy, and society (Pankaeo, 2022). This research is consistent with the work of Srisukshayoakul (2021), which suggests that political motives drive cannabis policy as a strategy to gain electoral support by addressing public health concerns. This contrasts with the study by Jae-o and Techophisanwong (2021) on cannabis myths, which uncovers the political and ideological motivations that have influenced historical state representations of cannabis as a harmful substance. The stigma surrounding cannabis, perpetuated by legal, medical, educational, and media institutions, has cast it in a negative light for decades.

This research, drawing on literature from political science, underscores that the cannabis policy, in its role as both a campaign issue and a medicinal substance, is closely linked to political agendas. The political framing of cannabis legalization has resulted in a range of public responses, both supportive and critical, highlighting the complex interplay of political influence, public health discussions, and societal values in Thailand.

The Influence of The Cannabis Legalization Policy on Adolescents Subsequent to The Alterations in Drug-Related Regulations and Legislation in 2021 in Phitsanulok Province.

The authors choose to employ the principles of policy implementation. The execution of the policy and public service indicates that public service operations would prioritize the welfare and safety of the populace. The principal entities involved in delivering public services are government agencies and authorities tasked with formulating policies for such services, as elucidated by Reeder (1971), Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Rondinelli, Nellis, and Cheema (1983), Pressman and Wildavsky (1984), Goodnow (2017), Dimock (2008), and O'Toole et al. (2018). The explanation asserts that policy implementation is varied; nonetheless, the unifying aspect is the acts undertaken to fulfill the objectives of public policy. This entails transforming the objectives stated in the policy, which may encompass legislation or governmental or cabinet directives, into guidelines, plans, programs, or tangible actions to facilitate execution. In summary, policy implementation is varied; yet the unifying aspect is the activities undertaken to fulfill the objectives of public policy. This involves converting the objectives outlined in the policy, which may consist

of statutes or governmental or cabinet directives, into guidelines, plans, programs, or tangible actions to facilitate practical implementation. When evaluated in conjunction with the study's findings about the impacts of the liberal cannabis policy on children after the 2021 changes in drug policies and laws, it reveals a predominance of negative consequences over good ones. This is derived from the contents of The Draft Cannabis and Hemp Act (Office of the Narcotics Control Board, Ministry of Justice, 2022). Despite the Narcotic Drugs Code Act, 2021 reclassifying cannabis and hemp as non-narcotic substances, regulatory measures must remain in place to facilitate the development of cannabis for medicinal purposes while prohibiting its recreational use and consumption. Consequently, The Draft Cannabis and Hemp Act, encompasses legislation, systems, growing guidelines, and several methods of use (Brommanan, 2009; Supachai & Boonkham, 2017).

Research findings reveal that the policy on cannabis legalization and its effects on adolescents, after the alterations in drug policies and regulations in 2021, arise from political variables influencing policy creation. The execution of the cannabis legalization policy, as indicated by research findings, fails to correspond with the notion of policy implementation, since the fundamental principle of this concept is that public policy objectives aim to enhance quality of life, encompassing aspects such as employment, income, health, and welfare. Nonetheless, the cannabis legalization strategy and its execution contain legal ambiguities. The Draft Cannabis and Hemp Act has been determined to insufficiently safeguard children and youth, prompting concerns over its societal ramifications, as the government is unable to regulate cannabis usage as a narcotic. The Draft Cannabis and Hemp Act retains ambiguous provisions, resulting in societal apprehensions, affecting youth, and promoting the recreational use of cannabis over its medicinal application, which contradicts the principles of policy formulation and implementation.

A review of literature and research concerning the effects of cannabis legalization policy on youth, subsequent to the alterations in drug policies and laws in 2021 in Phitsanulok Province, indicates that the repercussions of the cannabis legalization policy on youth are predominantly negative rather than positive. The research findings align with the work of Lohlekha (2022), which elucidates the implications of the cannabis liberalization policy on the health of children and adolescents, as it may influence their brain development. This aligns with Hamontree's (2018) research, which highlights the correlation between cannabis use among youth and the cannabis liberalization policy, revealing a decline in the average age of individuals in Ang Thong province engaging in risky drug use behavior, especially among those aged 12–15 years. The research findings on this matter contrast with the studies conducted by Jitnamthap and Wiwatworapan (2010), who examined the risky behaviors of teenagers in Mueang district of Nakhon Ratchasima province, and the Youth Network Against Cannabis (YNAC), which concentrated only on health-related concerns.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study reveals that the liberalization of cannabis in Thailand has been profoundly influenced by political motivations, as examined through a political science perspective. The Bhumjaithai Party first introduced this policy as a campaign commitment during the 2019 general election, positioning it as an issue of medical autonomy and economic potential. Following the party's assumption of governmental responsibilities, efforts to promote cannabis legalization increased, with the policy framed as a progressive approach to public health and agricultural development. The political implications are complex, reaching far beyond the scope of public health. The policy has received a mix of support and criticism, highlighting the inherent tension between economic liberalization and public safety. The recommendations emphasize the importance of a balanced approach that considers both the socio-economic benefits and the long-term social impacts on Thai youth. Policymakers are advised to proceed with caution concerning cannabis liberalization until there is enhanced legislative clarity and well-defined regulatory frameworks in place.

The study highlights the importance of the Thai government adopting a comprehensive approach to cannabis policy, prioritizing the protection of youth. The subsequent recommendations are provided for your consideration: 1. Strengthen Youth Protection Measures: Implement stringent packaging and advertising regulations to ensure cannabis products do not appeal to youth, similar to the regulations established for tobacco and alcohol. Furthermore, establish age limitations and limit public possession to deter recreational use. 2. Enhance Public Awareness: Develop educational programs in schools and communities to inform youth and parents about the potential risks associated with cannabis use. Furthermore, develop awareness campaigns that emphasize the legal restrictions and potential penalties related to misuse, especially in rural and

suburban regions where cannabis usage rates are higher. 3. Address Legal Deficiencies through Comprehensive Legislation: Accelerate the passage of the Cannabis and Hemp Act, ensuring it includes thorough regulations on cultivation, packaging, distribution, and public use, with a strong emphasis on safeguarding youth. Furthermore, 4. Integrate Cannabis Regulation with Broader Drug Control Policies: Position cannabis within the framework of national drug policy and prevention strategies to improve alignment with Thailand's public health and safety priorities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Fundings

Funded by the Center for Addiction Studies (CADS), Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, Contract No. 66-00111-0005, Fiscal Year 2023-2024

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