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Policy analysis

# Drug policy reform and the reclassification of cannabis in England and Wales: A cautionary tale

Michael Shiner

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### Abstract

When the legal classification of cannabis was downgraded in 2004 it represented the most significant liberalisation of British drug law in more than 30 years. Paradoxically, however, this apparently progressive reform led to an intensification of police efforts targeting minor possession offences and its failure was confirmed in January 2009 when the decision to downgrade cannabis was reversed. This article documents the impact that reclassification had on law enforcement activities and seeks to explain why it failed to deliver a more progressive approach. Drawing on official statistics, the analysis charts the process of net-widening that followed the reform, identifying a sharp increase in the number of people caught in the criminal justice net for minor possession offences. While police targeting of such offences was an unintended consequence of performance

targets, broader political influences were also at play. The contradictions and reversals involved in the reclassification of cannabis, it is argued, can be readily understood in terms of the broader politics of crime and control and the "structured ambivalence" of state responses.



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## Keywords

Cannabis policing; Drug reform; The politics of crime control

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