

## Friend or foe: Is cannabis use associated with a reduction in heroin use over 20-years?

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**Introduction and aims:** Cannabis and opioid use disorders (OUD) make up over three quarters of all illicit substance use disorders worldwide<sup>(1)</sup>, and they frequently co-occur<sup>(2, 3)</sup>. Considering that opioid use is associated with a considerably greater health burden<sup>(1, 4)</sup>, recent studies argue that cannabis may be used as a substitute for opioids<sup>(5-9)</sup>. Using data collected as part of the Australian Treatment Outcome Study (ATOS), the current paper aims to examine the relationship between cannabis and heroin use over time.

**Design and Methods:** 615 people with heroin dependence were recruited to ATOS in 2001-2002 and reinterviewed at 3-, 12-, 24-, 36-months, 11 and 20-years post-baseline (follow-up rates of 89%, 81%, 76%, 70%, 70% and 64% respectively). Heroin and cannabis use were assessed at each time point using the Opiate Treatment Index (OTI).

**Results:** Preliminary analyses indicate that the proportion of those reporting past-month cannabis and heroin use declined from baseline (68.1%; 98.7%) to the 20-year follow-up (39.4%; 24.8%). However, the decrease in average severity of use was far more pronounced for heroin than cannabis use. No association between cannabis use and subsequent heroin use, or vice-versa, was found.

**Discussion and conclusion:** While severity of cannabis use was found to be relatively consistent throughout the study period among people with heroin dependence, there was no evidence to suggest that cannabis substituted heroin use over 20-years. Drug treatment services and policy makers should reconsider the role of cannabis use among those with opioid use disorder.

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