

Assessing Engagement in Cannabis Policy: A Survey of Washington State Elected Officials



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Key Points

- This study aimed to assess Washington State elected officials' views on cannabis policy, including economic opportunities, health impacts, and community policy priorities.
- Researchers conducted an online survey with 22 questions, sent to 1,740 elected officials (or their designated administrative assistant) across the state.
- Of the 148 respondents, most were city or town elected officials (85%), and the majority represented jurisdictions where cannabis sales are legal.
- Policy engagement: Over a quarter (27.7%) of elected officials had worked on cannabis policy, with zoning/land use regulations and cannabis tax revenue being the most common focus areas.
- Barriers to policy work: Most elected officials did not perceive any significant barriers to their engagement on cannabis policies. Lack of staff time (48.2%) and limited knowledge of cannabis policy best practices (46.9%) were cited as posing some degree of barrier.
- Top concerns and priorities: Youth cannabis use (59.4%) and its negative health effects were the most pressing concerns; policies limiting youth exposure, such as restricting appealing packaging, received the strongest support.
- Interest and advocacy gaps: While 69.6% of respondents expressed interest in being involved in cannabis industry regulation, most had not been approached by stakeholders, indicating potential gaps in advocacy and engagement efforts.
- This study offers important insights into elected officials' cannabis policy priorities, providing a foundation for targeted public health advocacy, education, and informed policymaking at the local level.

Introduction

In 2012, Washington State adopted Initiative 502, establishing a comprehensive regulatory framework for cannabis. This initiative led to the licensing of state-approved producers, processors, and retailers. Since then, the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board (LCB) has been responsible for overseeing retail cannabis licensing and regulation while the state legislature creates and passes laws related to the regulation of cannabis. City, town, and county elected officials may further regulate or prohibit sales of cannabis through the passage of ordinances or

moratoriums. For example, local governments can prohibit or designate appropriate zones for state-licensed cannabis businesses.

The goal of the study was to assess state and local elected officials' perspectives on economic opportunities associated with the cannabis industry, health impacts of cannabis consumption, and priorities of local communities. To the best of our knowledge, the Public Health Institute's (PHI) Prevention Policy Group in California is the first to have assessed elected officials' perspectives on cannabis policies (in process).¹ PHI provided the survey questions, study procedures, and protocols used in the California study to our Washington team, which we adapted to fit Washington's context.

Methods

Participants: Current Washington State elected officials (EOs) in city, town, county, and state offices, or their designated administrative assistant, were eligible to participate.

Procedures: Recruitment occurred between September and October 2024. Electro Analytics, a third-party advocacy and policy tracking platform, provided a directory of names and emails for city, town, county, and state elected officials and their administrative assistants (n=1,950). After excluding 210 invalid or duplicate emails and accounting for the inability to find emails for some elected officials, the final total was 1,740 eligible emails for elected officials (city/town, 1,319; county, 128; state, 152; legislative & administrative assistants, 141). Each elected official and legislative or administrative assistant was sent an invitation up to three times to participate in the online study.

Questionnaire: The survey consisted of 22 questions covering the following topics: cannabis legality in their jurisdiction, experience with cannabis policy, barriers to work on cannabis policies, perspectives on specific cannabis policies, interest in cannabis policy, which entities have approached them about cannabis policies, and political affiliation. At the end of the survey, respondents were given an opportunity to share more information on their priorities for cannabis policy in a comment box.

Analysis: Descriptive analysis was used to summarize the proportion of elected officials endorsing each policy approach and barrier approach presented.

¹ Whitacre, R., Padon, AA., Simard, BJ., Silver, LD. *Assessing Attitudes on Cannabis Policy Issues among Policymakers: Survey of Elected Officials in City and County-level Government in California*. Prevention Policy Group, Public Health Institute, Berkeley, CA

Results

Respondents

A total of 148 participants responded to the survey (number of responses per question varied from 140 to 148). As expected, the majority of responses were from city/town elected officials (85% of respondents). Fewer county- and state-elected officials (9% and 6% respectively) completed the survey (see Table 1). Cannabis sales are legal in most of the city/town and county respondents' (69.7%) jurisdictions. Elected officials reported being affiliated with the Democratic (31.1%), Republican (20.9%), Independent (14.9%), or other (16.9%) political parties. Others preferred not to answer or did not respond (14.8%) which political party they affiliated with, while a small number (1.4%) did not affiliate with any political party.

Table 1 – Washington State elected officials surveyed by jurisdiction and elected official type

Jurisdiction	Elected Official Type	n	%
City/Town	City Mayor	25	16.9
	City Council	94	63.5
	Other (Deputy Mayor, Town Council)	4	2.7
	Responding on behalf of an elected official	3	2.0
County	County Commissioner	10	6.7
	County Council	1	0.7
	Other	1	0.7
	Responding on behalf of an elected official	1	0.7
State	State legislator	9	6.1
Total		148	100

Policy Engagement and Barriers

A little over a quarter (27.7%) of elected officials have been involved in cannabis policy work. About half of them (53.6%) focused on business operation rules, specifically zoning and land use regulations, followed by use of tax revenue generated by cannabis retail sales (36.5%). Some elected officials commented on their policy priorities, with one expressing the need for more transparency in the distribution of cannabis tax revenue: *"More transparency on where cannabis tax revenue goes and is utilized in the WA State government [is needed],"* said one city council member. They also noted that counties and cities receive very little of these taxes: *"I would like to see counties receive a larger share of cannabis revenue and fewer restrictions on how that revenue can be utilized,"* said a county commissioner. Three elected officials described working on other policies, with one city council member noting work on *"Federal banking lobbying. Business support and protection after break-ins."*

Table 2 describes the perceived barriers to elected officials' ability to work on cannabis policies. Overall, most elected officials did not perceive any of the listed factors posing a barrier to their engagement on cannabis policies. A lack of staff time to work on relevant issues (48.2%) and knowledge of cannabis policy best practices (46.9%) posed some barrier to their engagement in cannabis policy.

*Table 2 – Perceived barriers to work on cannabis policies by Washington State elected officials**

Factors (%)	Major barrier	Minor barrier	Not a barrier	I don't know
A lack of...				
Political organizational leadership and support	15.5	9.2	59.2	16.2
Stakeholder support	15.6	17.7	49.6	17.0
Technical resources or support	10.7	20.0	55.0	14.3
Staff time for work on relevant issues	22.1	26.4	42.9	9.3
Knowledge of cannabis policy best practices	18.9	28.0	39.2	14.0
Knowledge of cannabis, its uses and effects	11.9	17.5	62.2	8.4
Knowledge of priorities for communities	15.0	20.7	50.7	13.6
Legal restrictions on proposing policy	12.6	19.6	51.0	16.8

**The number of respondents for each factor varies slightly. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of respondents in each row.*

Policy Priorities

Over half (58%) of elected officials surveyed felt some degree of concern (very to somewhat) about the adverse health effects of cannabis consumption. One city council member who has worked on cannabis policy commented, *"Levels of THC in cannabis have been concentrated to the point where a small amount can cause adverse impacts especially to youth and new users. I would like the State to cap the potency at a much lower level."* On the other hand, another city council member who has not worked on cannabis policy commented, *"Cannabis is shown to be safe to use with many medical benefits. We should be working to destigmatize cannabis use and pressure our federal representatives to fully legalize it."*

The most frequently selected cannabis-related issue that elected officials believed impacts local communities was youth cannabis use (59.4%). Adverse health or social effects of cannabis use (49.3%) and tax revenue (42.6%) were also important issues. Survey participants were asked to select the top three cannabis policies they thought were important to their constituents out of 12 policies presented. They identified the most important issues as:

1. Negative health impacts of youth use (50.7%)
2. Negative impact of cannabis-related crime and violence (41.9%)

3. Eliminating the illegal market (25.7%), along with negative health impacts of cannabis consumption in general (25.7%)

Regarding specific approaches to cannabis policy (Table 3), not allowing packaging to be attractive to youth was supported by 80.1% of participants. In contrast, allowing consumption sites was opposed by 54.1% of participants. With respect to regulations to reduce youth cannabis use, respondents believed that the most effective policy would be to limit or prohibit sales of flavored cannabis products for inhalation (39.9%). Increasing funds for youth prevention programs (34.4%) and eliminating the illicit cannabis market (34.4%) were the second most supported cannabis policies, both receiving the same number of selections, to prevent youth cannabis use. Many respondents supported using tax revenues generated by taxes sales for treating substance use disorder (53.3%) and funding law enforcement (50.7%).

Table 3 – Elected officials position on approaches to cannabis policies

Policy Approach (%)	Support	Oppose	Neutral
Not allowing packaging to be attractive to youth	80.1	3.4	16.4
Age gating cannabis products	56.6	15.2	28.3
Establishing THC potency caps	55.9	10.3	33.8
Licensing of adult use retail stores in your jurisdiction	50.0	27.4	22.6
Medical tax exemption for those in the WA medical authorization database	44.4	23.6	31.9
Localizing cannabis marketing regulation authority	38.6	18.6	42.8
Allowing for personal growing of non-medical cannabis	34.5	33.8	31.7
Allowing consumption sites	22.6	54.1	23.3

**The number of respondents for each factor varies slightly. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of respondents in each row.*

Interests in Cannabis Policy

A majority of elected officials believe cannabis is an important policy issue (62%) and have some interest (69.6%) in being involved in regulation of the cannabis industry. Respondents expressed interest in doing additional cannabis policy work regarding the use of tax revenue generated from cannabis retail sales (30.4%) and restricting product types that are attractive to kids (27.7%). A city council member commented on the public health risks of high-potency cannabis and the regulation of these products:

The area I am most interested in is regulating sale and access to the high potency weed. The issue of "this isn't your parent's weed of yesteryear." Not even sure this is a youth versus adult issue. Does anyone need that high potency product and the risks of cannabis-induced psychiatric disorders that go with it?

Many elected officials reported that no stakeholders/entities (42.6%) have approached them about cannabis-related issues. Private citizens have approached surveyed elected officials the most (33.8%) followed by representatives of the cannabis industry (25%). Few historically marginalized community organizations (6%), and colleges/universities have approached elected officials (6%).

Conclusions

This study aimed to assess state and local policymakers' perspectives on the economic opportunities associated with the cannabis industry, the health impacts of cannabis consumption, and the policy priorities of local communities. The survey predominantly received responses from local (city/town and county) elected officials, with city council members making up the majority. Among the elected officials who participated, slightly more than a quarter had worked on cannabis-related policies. Of these, nearly half specifically focused on business operation rules. Youth cannabis use emerged as the most important issue to elected officials and was perceived as a significant concern among their constituents. There was strong support for policies aimed at preventing youth cannabis use through packaging regulations.

This study provides valuable insights into local-level elected officials' priorities and perspectives on the health impacts of cannabis consumption. These findings can be used by public health officials and community advocates in various ways, such as advocating for specific regulations within local jurisdictions, or identifying educational gaps that need to be addressed among local elected officials. Overall, the study offers a foundation for informed decision-making and advocacy at the local level.

Limitations

A limitation of our study was the low response rate, which prevented us from conducting cross-analysis of variables such as elected officials' roles, policy priorities, and political affiliations. Such a low response rate is consistent with surveys without incentives, or established relationships with the population of interest. Recruitment began a few months prior to the general elections which may have also had an impact on the response rate. It is likely that responses are biased towards the elected officials most interested in cannabis policies, suggesting caution on generalizing these results.

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