



## REFORMING CANNABIS POLICY FROM WITHIN - A DATA DRIVEN APPROACH



**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**  
IYUNIVESITHI YASEKAPA • UNIVERSITEIT VAN KAAPSTAD

# REFORMING CANNABIS POLICY FROM WITHIN - A DATA DRIVEN APPROACH

## ***Funding Proposal***

Fields of Green for **All** & Centre of Criminology, University of Cape Town.

### **Executive Summary**

This research project, titled Reforming Cannabis Policing from Within: A Data-Driven Approach, addresses the ongoing misalignment between South Africa's evolving cannabis legislation—notably the Cannabis for Private Purposes Bill—and current law enforcement practices. Despite the bill's intent to decriminalise certain aspects of cannabis use and cultivation for private purposes, arrests for possession, use, and cultivation continue, often reflecting outdated policing protocols and inconsistent legal interpretations. These enforcement discrepancies disproportionately affect socio-economically marginalised communities, exacerbating existing inequalities and perpetuating systemic biases within the criminal justice system.

The project seeks to bridge this gap by systematically collecting, analysing, and utilising data from individuals arrested for cannabis-related offences, gathered through the Stop the Cops initiative—a confidential hotline designed to support those affected and document enforcement practices—as well as other sources such as crime data collected by the Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town. The collected data has been compiled through a structured digital intake process, capturing key information such as arrest locations, offence types, police conduct, and socio-economic backgrounds of those arrested.

Funding this project is imperative for ensuring a data-driven, evidence-based approach to cannabis policing reform in South Africa. The project will leverage the data to directly engage with SAPS management so as to reform the current directives driving arrests from within. By supporting this research then, funders will directly contribute to the generation of critical insights that will inform legislative bodies, law enforcement agencies, and civil society actors about the real-world implications of current enforcement strategies. The research outputs—including policy briefs, academic publications, stakeholder engagement reports, and interactive data visualisations—will provide policymakers and law enforcement with tangible recommendations for aligning policing practices with legislative intent, thereby reducing wrongful arrests and mitigating socio-economic harm.

Additionally, funders will gain visibility as key supporters of progressive, rights-based approaches to drug policy reform, reinforcing their commitment to justice, equity, and effective governance. Through public dissemination and strategic advocacy, this project has the potential to catalyse systemic change, ensuring that South Africa's cannabis laws are implemented in a manner that upholds human rights, legal consistency, and social justice.



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### **1. Introduction and Rationale**

In the wake of South Africa's evolving cannabis laws, particularly the Cannabis for Private Purposes Bill, there remains a significant disconnect between legislative changes and on-the-ground policing practices. The bill, while decriminalising certain aspects of cannabis use and cultivation for private purposes, has led to a complex legal landscape that law enforcement officers may misinterpret or inconsistently apply. Despite legal shifts, individuals continue to face arrest for possession, use, and cultivation, often under questionable legal interpretations or due to outdated policing protocols that have not yet adapted to the new legal framework.

This disconnect raises critical questions about the alignment of law enforcement practices with constitutional mandates and the legislative intent behind cannabis decriminalisation. The persistent arrests, particularly in socio-economically marginalised communities, suggest that enforcement is not only inconsistent but may also exacerbate existing inequalities and perpetuate systemic biases within the criminal justice system. These disparities highlight the urgent need for empirical evidence to guide policy reforms, ensuring that the implementation of cannabis laws aligns with human rights standards and principles of justice.

This project aims to address these discrepancies by systematically collecting and analysing data from individuals who have been arrested for cannabis-related offences via the Stop the Cops initiative. This hotline serves as a confidential platform where individuals can report their experiences, seek legal assistance, and contribute to a broader understanding of cannabis-related law enforcement trends. The data collected through this initiative will be spatially and quantitatively analysed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to identify patterns in arrest locations, frequency, and typology.

These patterns will be critically examined within the broader socio-economic and policing contexts of South Africa, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how cannabis laws are being enforced across different regions and communities. A preliminary analysis and geolocation of the data have been conducted, as can be seen in images 1 and 2.



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## 1. Introduction and Rationale



Figure 1. Geolocation of data points

The ultimate goal of this project is to translate these findings into actionable policy recommendations. By engaging with key stakeholders—including the South African Police Service (SAPS), judicial bodies, policymakers, and civil society organisations—the project aims to facilitate the development of new standard operating procedures (SOPs) that align law enforcement practices with the legal and constitutional frameworks governing cannabis use in South Africa. These SOPs will be designed to ensure consistent, fair, and rights-based enforcement, reducing unnecessary criminalisation and promoting a more equitable justice system. Such changes will be driven by data-centric research and the development of research tools such as the hotspot analysis, which reveals arrest frequency in relation to location.

The findings from this research will also serve as a critical tool for advocacy, providing empirical evidence to support calls for broader drug policy reform and increased oversight of law enforcement practices. By highlighting the gaps between legislative intent and actual policing, the project seeks to foster greater accountability and transparency within the criminal justice system, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society.

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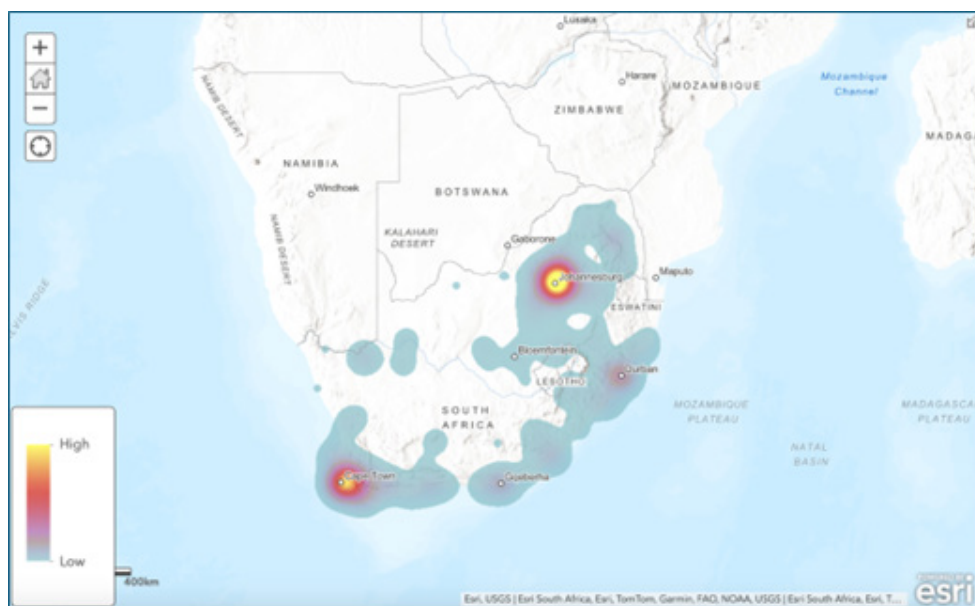


Figure 1. National arrest frequency

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### **1. Introduction and Rationale**

Funding this project will play a crucial role in achieving these objectives by enabling the development of a robust evidence base that informs meaningful legal and policy changes. Financial support will ensure the continued collection, analysis, and dissemination of arrest data, reinforcing efforts to bridge the gap between legislative intent and actual policing. Funders will directly contribute to a transformative initiative that not only advances cannabis law reform but also strengthens constitutional accountability within South Africa's law enforcement agencies.

The project's outputs—including comprehensive policy reports, GIS-based visualisations, stakeholder briefings, and academic publications—will serve as essential resources for advocacy and legal reform efforts. Furthermore, by supporting this research, funders will position themselves as champions of social justice, human rights, and equitable governance, reinforcing their commitment to progressive and evidence-based policymaking.

### **2. Key Stakeholders and Partners**

The success of this project is underpinned by the collaboration of two primary organisations, each bringing distinct but complementary expertise to ensure that the research is both academically rigorous and grounded in real-world experiences.

Fields of Green for All, a leading non-profit organisation in South Africa's cannabis advocacy landscape, plays a crucial role in representing and supporting individuals affected by cannabis-related arrests. Their extensive engagement with communities disproportionately impacted by outdated policing practices ensures that the project remains attuned to the lived realities of those facing enforcement injustices. By providing first-hand insights into how cannabis laws are applied on the ground, Fields of Green for All strengthens the project's ability to document and analyse enforcement patterns with accuracy and depth.

The Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town brings methodological expertise and academic credibility to the project. As a leading research institution in criminology, the Centre's involvement guarantees a sophisticated analytical approach, including the use of advanced Geographic Information Systems (GIS) tools, socio-economic analysis, and evidence-based policy development. The Centre's contribution ensures that the findings are not only robust but also positioned to influence academic discourse, policy debates, and law enforcement reforms at a national level.



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### **2. Key Stakeholders and Partners**

To fully realise the objectives of this project, securing a dedicated funding partner is essential. Financial support will enable the continued collection and analysis of critical data, the implementation of technology-driven research methods, and the facilitation of direct engagements with law enforcement agencies, policymakers, and civil society stakeholders. The project will actively collaborate with the South African Police Service (SAPS) to present empirical evidence and develop new standard operating procedures (SOPs) that align with constitutional and legislative mandates. By fostering dialogue and providing actionable recommendations, the project will work within existing institutional structures to drive meaningful, systemic change from within.

The project's outputs will be multifaceted and designed to maximise impact across academic, policy, and public engagement spheres. Key deliverables will include detailed policy reports with GIS-based spatial analyses of cannabis-related arrests, academic publications that contribute to criminological and legal scholarship, and interactive data visualisations that illustrate enforcement trends and disparities. Additionally, stakeholder engagement will take the form of structured policy dialogues, training sessions for law enforcement officials, and capacity-building workshops for advocacy groups. These outputs will not only serve as authoritative resources for legislative and policing reforms but also act as advocacy tools to mobilise public and institutional support for more equitable cannabis laws.

The importance of these outputs cannot be overstated. By producing high-quality, data-driven research, the project will provide compelling evidence to challenge outdated enforcement protocols and inform a transition toward policing practices that are legally consistent and socially just. Funders supporting this initiative will be directly contributing to a transformative effort that enhances transparency, reduces wrongful arrests, and ensures that cannabis law enforcement aligns with both human rights principles and South Africa's evolving legal framework. Furthermore, through strategic dissemination and policy engagement, funders will gain visibility as key allies in progressive drug policy reform, reinforcing their commitment to justice, equity, and effective governance.





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### **3. Research Aims and Objectives**

The study will be conducted in two subsequent phases, as Phase 1—Data Collection—has already been successfully completed.

#### Phase 1: Data Collection (Completed)

The *Stop the Cops* initiative served as the primary data collection point, where individuals reported their cannabis-related arrests via a confidential hotline. A structured digital intake form captured key data points, including:

- Date and location of arrest (GPS-enabled)
- Nature of offence (possession, use, cultivation, trafficking)
- Arresting authority (SAPS, Metro Police, specialised units)
- Police conduct and procedural details
- Socio-economic background of the arrested individual
- Outcome (charges laid, fines, court appearances, case withdrawal)

Data integrity was ensured through verification steps, such as cross-checking arrest data against media reports, legal records (where accessible), and corroborating reports from multiple sources.

#### Phase 2: Data Analysis

With a robust dataset in place, the focus will now shift to a comprehensive analysis aimed at extracting actionable insights that can drive policy reform.

#### **2.1 GIS Mapping and Spatial Analysis:**

GIS software (such as ArcGIS) will be employed to plot arrest locations, revealing spatial patterns and clustering phenomena. Heat maps will be developed to highlight high-arrest areas, distinguishing between urban, peri-urban, and rural trends. The spatial data will be cross-referenced with socio-economic indicators, such as income levels, education, and employment rates, to explore correlations between cannabis-related arrests and broader societal conditions.



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### **3. Research Aims and Objectives**

#### **2.2 Socio-Economic and Policing Contextualisation:**

This stage will embed the spatial data within the socio-political landscape of South Africa. By examining the relationship between arrest patterns and variables like historical policing practices, crime rates, and community demographics, the project will uncover systemic factors contributing to enforcement disparities. This analysis is crucial for understanding whether cannabis-related policing disproportionately affects certain communities and if these patterns align with broader issues of inequality and systemic bias.

#### **2.3 Statistical and Qualitative Analysis:**

Descriptive statistics will summarise the frequency and nature of arrests by location, demographic group, and offence type. Regression analysis will identify significant predictors of arrest rates, while qualitative case studies will provide deeper insights into individual experiences, highlighting instances of potential rights violations or procedural inconsistencies. Comparative analysis will also benchmark current findings against historical cannabis policing trends, offering a longitudinal perspective on enforcement practices.

### **Phase 3: Stakeholder Engagement and Policy Reform**

The final phase of the project focuses on translating research findings into practical, impactful policy reforms. This phase is critical in ensuring that the research does not remain confined to academic circles but actively contributes to real-world changes in law enforcement practices.

#### **3.1 Policy Brief Development:**

Findings will be synthesised into comprehensive policy briefs tailored to different stakeholder audiences, including law enforcement, policymakers, and civil society. These briefs will highlight key patterns and discrepancies in cannabis-related policing and provide concrete, evidence-based recommendations for SOP reforms.

#### **.3.1 Policy Brief Development:**

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### 3. Research Aims and Objectives

#### Phase 3: Stakeholder Engagement and Policy Reform

##### 3.2 Strategic Stakeholder Engagement:

- **South African Police Service (SAPS):** The project will facilitate targeted workshops and training sessions with SAPS leadership and frontline officers. These engagements will focus on presenting the research findings, discussing their implications, and collaboratively developing new SOPs that reflect the legal changes and promote fair, consistent enforcement practices.
- **Judiciary and Legal Experts:** Consultations will be held with legal professionals and judicial bodies to ensure that proposed SOP reforms align with constitutional principles and legal precedents. These discussions will also explore mechanisms for ensuring accountability and oversight in the enforcement of cannabis laws.
- **Policymakers and Legislators:** The project will engage with parliamentary committees and government officials to advocate for legislative clarity and the establishment of oversight mechanisms that ensure consistent enforcement of cannabis laws across different regions and communities.
- **Civil Society and Advocacy Groups:** Collaborations with advocacy organisations, human rights groups, and community stakeholders will amplify the project's impact, fostering a broader movement for drug policy reform and law enforcement accountability.

##### 3.3 Implementation and Monitoring:

The project will support the implementation of new SOPs through practical tools, training modules, and capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement agencies. A monitoring and evaluation framework will be established to track the impact of these reforms on policing practices and community outcomes. This framework will include regular assessments of arrest patterns, compliance with legal standards, and feedback from affected communities, ensuring that the reforms lead to tangible, sustained improvements in law enforcement practices.

By focusing on practical outcomes and sustained engagement with key stakeholders, this project aims to drive meaningful reforms that align cannabis-related policing with South Africa's legal and constitutional frameworks, promoting justice, equity, and human rights.



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### **4. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity is central to the successful execution of this project, particularly given the sensitive nature of the data being collected and analysed. The following measures will be implemented to ensure the highest standards of ethical conduct:

- Confidentiality and Anonymity: All personal data collected through the Stop the Cops initiative will be anonymised to protect the identities of individuals reporting their arrests. Unique identifiers will be used in place of personal information, ensuring that data cannot be traced back to any individual.
- Informed Consent: Participants will be fully informed about the purpose of the research, the ways in which their data will be used, and their rights regarding data withdrawal and privacy. Informed consent will be obtained before any data is collected, and participants will have the option to withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions.
- Data Security: Robust data security protocols will be implemented to safeguard sensitive information. Data will be stored on encrypted servers with restricted access limited to authorised research personnel. Regular security audits will be conducted to ensure compliance with data protection standards, and all data transfers will be encrypted to prevent unauthorised access.
- Compliance with Legal Standards: The project will adhere to all relevant data protection laws and ethical guidelines, including the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) in South Africa. Ethical approval will be sought from appropriate institutional review boards to ensure that the research meets the highest standards of ethical practice.
- Minimising Harm: The project will take proactive measures to minimise any potential harm to participants, including psychological distress or legal repercussions. Support resources, such as legal assistance and counselling services, will be made available to participants as needed.

By implementing these ethical safeguards, the project will ensure that the rights and well-being of participants are protected throughout the research process. These measures will also enhance the credibility and integrity of the research findings, reinforcing the project's commitment to justice, equity, and human rights.

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### **5. Timeline**

The project is structured into three distinct phases with specific timelines to ensure timely and efficient execution:

#### **Phase 1: Data Collection (Completed)**

This phase, focusing on gathering self-reported arrest data via the Stop the Cops initiative, has been successfully completed. The data collected provides a robust foundation for subsequent analysis and policy development.

#### **Phase 2: Data Analysis (Expected Duration: 3 Months)**

This phase will commence immediately following the completion of data collection. The comprehensive analysis will involve GIS mapping, socio-economic contextualisation, and statistical evaluations to identify patterns and systemic issues in cannabis-related policing. The analysis will be critical in generating actionable insights that inform policy recommendations.

#### **Phase 3: Stakeholder Engagement and Policy Reform (Expected Duration: 3 Months)**

Building on the findings from Phase 2, this phase will focus on translating research insights into practical policy changes. Activities will include developing policy briefs, conducting workshops with SAPS and other stakeholders, and implementing new SOPs. Continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms will be established to evaluate the impact of these reforms, ensuring they lead to sustained improvements in policing practices.

By adhering to this timeline, the project aims to deliver impactful results within a six-month period post-data collection, driving meaningful reforms in cannabis-related law enforcement practices in South Africa.



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### **6. Conclusion**

This project represents a critical step towards bridging the gap between South Africa's evolving cannabis legislation and the realities of law enforcement practices on the ground. By leveraging data collected from the Stop the Cops initiative, the research provides an empirical foundation for understanding how cannabis laws are being enforced across diverse socio-economic contexts. The comprehensive analysis of this data, through GIS mapping and socio-economic contextualisation, will illuminate patterns of enforcement, highlight systemic biases, and reveal the socio-political dynamics influencing cannabis-related arrests.

The project's phased approach—from data collection to in-depth analysis, followed by strategic stakeholder engagement—ensures that the research will not only identify key issues but also drive practical, actionable reforms. The development and implementation of new standard operating procedures (SOPs) in collaboration with SAPS, policymakers, and civil society organisations will promote fair, consistent, and rights-based policing practices that align with the legal framework governing cannabis use.

Furthermore, the project's emphasis on ethical considerations and data protection underscores its commitment to safeguarding participant rights and ensuring the integrity of the research process. By adhering to rigorous ethical standards, the project will foster trust and credibility, both within the academic community and among the broader public.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a more just and equitable society by reducing unnecessary criminalisation, promoting accountability and transparency within law enforcement, and supporting broader drug policy reform in South Africa. Through sustained engagement with key stakeholders and continuous monitoring of the implemented reforms, the project will ensure that its impact is both meaningful and enduring, aligning cannabis-related policing practices with the principles of justice, equity, and human rights.



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### **7. Budget**

The total projected budget for this project is **R600,000**, allocated as follows below. It should be noted from the outset that funders may influence and define the allocation of funds in conversation with the research partners.

The projected allocations for the budget currently demarcate the funds in the following way.

1.     **Consultancy/Research Fees:**  
        Dr. Simon Howell (50% of consultancy budget): R240,000  
        Fields of Green for All (50% of consultancy budget): R240,000
2.     **Personnel Costs:**  
        Research Assistant(s) for Data Analysis and Policy Development: R36,000
3.     **Workshops and Stakeholder Engagement:**  
        Venue Hire, Materials, and Facilitation for Workshops with SAPS, Legal Experts, and Civil Society: R20,000
4.     **Travel and Accommodation:**  
        Travel for Stakeholder Engagement and Field Visits: R34,000
5.     **Publication and Dissemination of Findings:**  
        Production of Policy Briefs, Reports, and Public Forums: R20,000
6.     **Miscellaneous and Contingency:**  
        Unforeseen Expenses and Administrative Costs: R10,000

**Grand Total: R600,000**

