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# Content Analysis of the Corporate Social Responsibility Practices of 9 Major Cannabis Companies in Canada and the US

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## Abstract

**IMPORTANCE** The cannabis industry has sought to normalize itself and expand its markets in the 21st century. One strategy used by companies to generate positive public relations is corporate social responsibility (CSR). It is critical to understand these efforts to influence the public and politicians given the risks of increased cannabis use.

**OBJECTIVES** To analyze cannabis industry CSR behaviors, determine their characteristics, and compare their practices with those of the tobacco industry.

**DESIGN, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS** This qualitative study of CSR activities conducted between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2021, evaluated 9 of the 10 largest publicly traded cannabis companies in the US and Canada. Data were collected from August 1 to December 31, 2021. The 10th company was excluded because it engaged in cannabis-based pharmaceutical sales but not CSR. A systematic review of corporate websites and Nexis Uni was performed, resulting in collection of 153 news articles, press releases, and Web pages. Charitable and philanthropic actions were included. Themes were identified and interpreted using modified grounded theory.

**MAIN OUTCOMES AND MEASURES** CSR activities and spending.

**RESULTS** Nine major cannabis companies in the US and Canada engaged in CSR activities that encouraged increased consumption and targeted marginalized communities. Companies claimed these activities would mitigate the harms of cannabis prohibition, promote diversity, expand access to medical cannabis, and support charitable causes. They developed educational programs, sustainability initiatives, and voluntary marketing codes and used strategies similar to those used by tobacco companies to recruit public interest organizations as allies.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE** These findings suggest that cannabis companies developed CSR strategies comparable to those used by the tobacco industry to influence regulation, suggesting that cannabis companies should be included when addressing commercial determinants of health.

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## Introduction

As of February 2022, 19 states and Washington, DC, had voted to legalize recreational cannabis use in the US,<sup>1</sup> although the US federal government classifies cannabis as a Schedule I substance with high abuse potential and no approved medical purpose<sup>2</sup> despite therapeutic evidence.<sup>3,4</sup> Cannabis companies (some represented on state regulatory boards)<sup>5,6</sup> prefer policies likely to increase consumption.<sup>5,7</sup> Canada legalized cannabis nationally in 2018,<sup>8</sup> establishing a market based on advice from a task force including government, health, research, legal, law enforcement, and non-cannabis

## Key Points

**Question** What are the corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of the cannabis industry and how do they compare with tobacco industry practices?

**Findings** This qualitative study of 9 cannabis companies determined that they engaged in CSR activities nominally to mitigate the negative effects of cannabis prohibition; promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion; made charitable contributions; promoted cannabis medical utility and access; and addressed cannabis industry harms. Cannabis companies' CSR strategies were similar to those used by tobacco companies to advance their interests and recruit third-party organizations as allies.

**Meaning** These findings suggest that these cannabis companies developed CSR initiatives similar to those used by the tobacco industry to influence politics and regulation, and this should be considered when evaluating commercial determinants of health.

## + Supplemental content

Author affiliations and article information are listed at the end of this article.

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business representatives. Input was solicited from advocacy organizations and cannabis companies,<sup>9</sup> the latter of which seek reduced taxes and regulations.<sup>10</sup> Research on the effects of recreational cannabis legalization on cannabis use has been inconclusive, with studies reporting different increases and decreases in consumption after legalization.<sup>11</sup> One study<sup>12</sup> found that cannabis use increased in the past year and past month among populations of Asian, Hispanic, Native American, non-Hispanic White, and Pacific Islander race and ethnicity and among individuals reporting multiple races and ethnicities who were aged 21 to 30 years in states that had legalized medical and recreational cannabis. The study found no changes in cannabis use by non-Hispanic Black individuals or for any racial or ethnic demographic group aged 12 to 20 years.<sup>12</sup> Another study of cannabis consumption in Canada found increased prevalence of cannabis use among middle-aged and older adults after recreational legalization.<sup>13</sup> Federal surveys conducted in 2020 by their respective governments found that 17.9% of individuals 12 years or older in the US<sup>14</sup> and 27% of persons 16 years or older in Canada consumed cannabis in the past 12 months.<sup>15</sup> Further cannabis normalization could increase consumption as well as expand the reach and strength of companies selling cannabis products.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) constitutes a company's philanthropic, ethical, and economic activities beyond profit seeking,<sup>16</sup> including mitigating environmental and societal impacts.<sup>17</sup> Corporate social responsibility promotes brands and secures government goodwill that protects business interests.<sup>18-21</sup> Controversial industries, including the tobacco industry, use CSR to bolster reputations burdened by *core stigma*,<sup>22</sup> a term indicating that products, conduct, or customers have a negative social impact.<sup>23</sup> Tobacco industry CSR activities ostensibly address harms caused by its products<sup>24,25</sup> but blame consumers<sup>26</sup> and present its programs as alternatives to regulation.<sup>26,27</sup> That industry's efforts include "youth smoking prevention" programs with forbidden fruit messaging,<sup>28,29</sup> smokers' rights groups that resist regulation,<sup>30,31</sup> and pharmaceuticalization, which reoriented business toward nicotine replacement therapy.<sup>32</sup> The World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control,<sup>33</sup> an international treaty adopted in 2003 to steer countries' tobacco control programming, mitigate the global tobacco epidemic, and curb the tobacco industry's interference in regulation, defines CSR as a form of advertising.<sup>34</sup>

As legal cannabis sales expand to new jurisdictions, the cannabis industry may seek to use CSR to gain legitimacy, secure approval, recruit allies, access government, and influence policy as it attempts to expand its customer base and legal markets. Past research on this question is limited: searches of academic databases found only 1 book chapter<sup>35</sup> covering the CSR activities conducted by 2 cannabis companies operating in Colorado and 3 articles<sup>36-38</sup> addressing CSR practices by cannabis companies, all of which stated that further research was needed. Comparison of cannabis companies' CSR practices with those of the tobacco industry is useful because we can assess commonalities and differences between the practices of a nascent industry exiting illegality and a long-established sector with a product that has historically been legal.<sup>39,40</sup> The recent legalization of cannabis in Canada and patchwork legalization of cannabis in 18 states in the US has led to the appearance of multiple smaller businesses alongside the multinational corporations in this sector. Owing to differences in the legality of cannabis within the US, cannabis businesses face varying market regulations. The prior criminalization of cannabis and resulting disparate racial and social harms has generated attention regarding how cannabis companies address diversity, equity, and inclusion, potentially influencing the focus of its CSR practices relative to the tobacco industry.

We reviewed cannabis CSR activities in the US and Canada between January 1, 2012, when Colorado first legalized recreational cannabis, and December 31, 2021. We sought to determine whether cannabis companies have CSR practices similar to those of the tobacco industry because both sell substances that are recreationally consumed and harmful to public health with comparable consumption modes (eg, smoking, vaping).

## Methods

For this qualitative study, we reviewed documents related to the CSR activities of cannabis companies between 2012 and 2021 using established methods from previous research of the tobacco,<sup>41</sup> alcohol,<sup>26</sup> and food<sup>16</sup> industries. We sampled the 10 largest cannabis companies by market capitalization as of January 2021 identified by Nasdaq,<sup>42</sup> an electronic securities trading market covering the US, Canada, and Europe.<sup>43,44</sup> We excluded 1 pharmaceutical company making cannabis-derived treatments and not involved with recreational markets, leaving 9 companies<sup>45-62</sup> (Table 1) in our sample.

Our data collection, coding, analysis, and writing process followed the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) reporting guideline. Our approach also relied on existing protocols for searching and analyzing industry documents.<sup>63-65</sup> Because this study did not involve human subjects, informed consent was not applicable. This research was approved by the University of California, San Francisco, Institutional Review Board. Information regarding CSR activities was collected from August 1 through December 31, 2021, through systematic searches of cannabis company websites and Nexis Uni articles written in English. Websites were reviewed for CSR activities, including events, sponsorships, nonprofit partnerships, education initiatives, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, donations, and sales drives.

Information on company websites was image captured and downloaded in PDF form. We searched Nexis Uni to find press releases and news coverage of cannabis companies' CSR activities. Search terms included company names combined with the keywords *corporate social responsibility*, *social equity*, and *donate*. Subsequent snowball searches,<sup>66</sup> a process in which key terms are identified in initial searches to find additional information, was used with brand and program names identified in initial searches. Philanthropic activities were included even if not labeled CSR. We identified 153 unique news articles, press releases, and Web pages that are described below.

We performed a content analysis to categorize evidence thematically, similar to studies used previously to analyze tobacco<sup>67</sup> and pharmaceutical<sup>68</sup> industry activities. One author (T.W.) with experience coding tobacco industry documents created a master file that summarized each cannabis company's CSR activities provided in each document. Themes were developed inductively through iterative coding and categorization<sup>69</sup> of language and informational patterns found in collected materials. Corporate social responsibility activities with language and foci designed to mitigate cannabis prohibition harms were grouped into a theme category, as were activities with language and

Table 1. Overview of the Top 9 Multinational Cannabis Companies in January 2021 According to Nasdaq

Company	Market capitalization as of November 2021, \$1 billion <sup>a</sup>	Headquarters (country) as of 2021	Year founded	Market sector
Curaleaf Holdings Inc	7.62 <sup>45</sup>	Curaleaf Holdings Inc <sup>46</sup> (US)	2010	Recreational and medical dispensaries, manufacturer
Innovative Industrial Properties	6.78 <sup>47</sup>	Innovative Industrial Properties (US) <sup>48,49</sup>	2016	Real estate for medical cannabis operations
Canopy Growth Corporation	5.99 <sup>50</sup>	Pitchbook (Canada) <sup>51</sup>	2013	Recreational dispensaries, manufacturer
Green Thumb Industries Inc	5.79 <sup>52</sup>	Green Thumb Industries Inc (US) <sup>53</sup>	2014	Recreational dispensaries, manufacturer
Cresco Labs Inc	4.19 <sup>54</sup>	Cresco Labs Inc (US) <sup>55</sup>	2013	Recreational and medical dispensaries, manufacturer
Trulieve	3.96 <sup>56</sup>	Trulieve (US) <sup>57</sup>	2016	Medical dispensaries, manufacturer
Cronos Group Inc	2.25 <sup>58</sup>	CNNMoney.com (Canada) <sup>59</sup>	2012	Manufacturer
GrowGeneration Corp	1.41 <sup>50</sup>	GrowGeneration Corp (US) <sup>60</sup>	2008	Hydroponics supplier
Columbia Care	1.06 <sup>61</sup>	United States Columbia Care (US) <sup>62</sup>	2012	Medical dispensaries

<sup>a</sup> From Google Finance.

foci regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion; charitable contributions; therapeutic and medical cannabis access promotion; and mitigation of cannabis industry harms.

We found that cannabis companies used CSR practices similarly to tobacco companies, claiming they voluntarily self-regulated by limiting youth access, making charitable contributions, and supporting advocacy organizations. We categorized activities under these classifications. When a document's relevance or categorization was questioned, it was discussed by 2 authors (T.W. and D.E.A.) until agreement was reached.

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## Results

The 9 companies in our sample operated in the US and Canada and were established between 2008 and 2016. Market capitalizations ranged from US \$1.06 billion to US \$7.62 billion in 2021 (Table 1). Two companies specialized in recreational cannabis manufacturing and retail sales, 2 were medical cannabis retailers (1 was also a manufacturer), 1 was a manufacturer, 2 manufactured and sold recreational and medical cannabis, 1 was a cannabis real estate company, and 1 supplied hydroponics. Two companies had ties to the alcohol and tobacco industries: Constellation Brands Inc, a US-based beer, wine, and spirits producer, purchased a 38.6% stake in Canopy Growth Corporation in 2017,<sup>70</sup> and Altria Group Inc, the parent company of Philip Morris,<sup>71</sup> purchased a 45% stake in Cronos Group Inc in 2019.<sup>72</sup> We identified 5 cannabis CSR areas: (1) campaigns supposedly mitigating the harmful effects of past cannabis prohibition; (2) hiring initiatives characterized as promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion; (3) charitable contributions; (4) researching therapeutic cannabis uses and increasing medical access; and (5) efforts claiming to address cannabis legalization harms.

### Campaigns Companies Claimed Would Mitigate the Harmful Effects of Past Cannabis Prohibition

Seven companies claimed their CSR activities addressed harms from past cannabis prohibition (Table 2).<sup>73-75,77-94,96,97,99,100</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc<sup>101-105</sup> and Cresco Labs Inc<sup>91,92,95,106,107</sup> created business incubators and licensing assistance programs for members of racial and ethnic minority populations and communities harmed by cannabis prohibition. The License Education Assistance Program, launched by Green Thumb Industries Inc in 2019, reoriented programming to support 3 social equity license applicants in Illinois<sup>102</sup> in August 2021.<sup>103</sup> The Social Equity and Education Development business incubator developed by Cresco Labs Inc held 13 events between 2019 and 2020 that assisted 225 applicants pursuing Illinois retail licenses.<sup>92</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc<sup>73,74</sup> and Green Thumb Industries Inc<sup>81</sup> funded nonprofits helping people with cannabis-related records rejoin society. Curaleaf Holdings Inc donated 10% of proceeds from BNoble cannabis product sales to 5 organizations helping formerly incarcerated people obtain work.<sup>73</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc allotted a portion of Good Green sales to a nonprofit grant program funding cannabis education, work training, employment assistance, and expungement services in communities harmed by cannabis criminalization.<sup>82,83</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc claimed it provided 3 Good Green grants as of 2021.<sup>108</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc collaborated with the Last Prisoner Project, a nonprofit founded by cannabis entrepreneurs<sup>109,110</sup> dedicated to expunging sentences of formerly incarcerated people and reintegrating them.<sup>81,111,112</sup> Three companies, Curaleaf Holdings Inc,<sup>75,95,113</sup> Cresco Labs Inc,<sup>91,114</sup> and Green Thumb Industries Inc,<sup>82,83</sup> established quotas and initiatives to hire previously incarcerated people. Cresco Labs Inc<sup>92,107</sup> and Green Thumb Industries Inc<sup>90</sup> developed restorative justice CSR activities. Cresco Labs Inc established scholarship programs at 2 universities in Ohio for people or communities harmed by drug war policies.<sup>95</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc funded 4 scholarships in 2 Ohio schools (Olive-Harvey College and Cleveland School of Cannabis) for students seeking cannabis industry involvement.<sup>84,115</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation,<sup>79,80</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc,<sup>113</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc,<sup>81-84</sup> Cresco Labs Inc,<sup>91-93,107,114,116,117</sup> and Trulieve<sup>97</sup> announced intentions to support efforts and organizations seeking to expunge criminal records.<sup>99</sup> Six companies joined industry associations supporting restorative criminal justice: Trulieve and

Table 2. Overview of CSR Activities Between 2012 and 2021 Addressing Cannabis Prohibition Harms of the 9 Largest Multinational Cannabis Companies as of January 2021

CSR activity <sup>a</sup>											
Company	Expungement and funding	Scholarships and internships	Business incubators	Postincarceration assistance	Brands with dedicated funding to reform	Donated store opening proceeds to reform	Donated proceeds from wholesale to reform	Hiring initiatives	Job training	Programs with reform focus	Joined trade associations advocating reform
Curaleaf Holdings Inc	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>73</sup> 2021	NA	NA	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>74</sup> 2021	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>73,74</sup>	NA	NA	Benzinga, <sup>75</sup> 2021; PR Newswire, <sup>76</sup> 2021	NA	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>77</sup> 2021	MENAFN, <sup>78</sup> 2021
Innovative Industrial Properties	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Canopy Growth Corporation	Canopy Growth Corporation, <sup>79</sup> 2020; Ravilojan, <sup>80</sup> 2020	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	MENAFN, <sup>78</sup> 2021
Green Thumb Industries Inc	GlobeNewswire, <sup>81</sup> 2020; MENAFN, <sup>82</sup> 2021; no author, <sup>83</sup> 2021; GlobeNewswire, <sup>84</sup> 2021; Green Thumb Industries, <sup>85</sup> 2021	GlobeNewswire, <sup>84</sup> 2021	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>74</sup> 2021	GlobeNewswire, <sup>84</sup> 2021; PR Newswire, <sup>86</sup> 2021	MENAFN, <sup>82</sup> 2021; no author, <sup>83</sup> 2021	No author, <sup>87</sup> 2020; GlobeNewswire, <sup>88</sup> 2020; no author, <sup>89</sup> 2020; PR Newswire, <sup>86</sup> 2021	NA	NA	MENAFN, <sup>82</sup> 2021; no author, <sup>83</sup> 2021	Green Thumb, <sup>90</sup> 2021	NA
Cresco Labs Inc	Business Wire, <sup>91</sup> 2020; Cresco Labs Inc, <sup>92</sup> 2021; Business Wire, <sup>93</sup> 2021; Business Wire, <sup>94</sup> 2019	No author, <sup>95</sup> 2019	NA	NA	NA	NA	Business Wire, <sup>93</sup> 2021	NA	NA	Cresco Labs Inc, <sup>92</sup> 2021	MENAFN, <sup>96</sup> 2020; MENAFN, <sup>78</sup> 2021
Trulieve	Trulieve, <sup>97</sup> 2021	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	MENAFN, <sup>96</sup> 2020
Cronos Group Inc	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Business Wire, <sup>98</sup> 2021; MENAFN, <sup>78</sup> 2021
GrowGeneration Corp	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Columbia Care	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	MENAFN, <sup>78</sup> 2021

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsibility; MENAFN, Middle East and North Africa Financial Network; NA, not applicable. <sup>a</sup> Citations link to company involvement in CSR activity.

Cresco Labs Inc joined National Cannabis Roundtable, a US trade organization,<sup>96</sup> whereas Canopy Growth Corporation, Curaleaf Holdings Inc, Cronos Group Inc, and Columbia Care joined the US Cannabis Council, a coalition seeking to end federal cannabis prohibition.<sup>98,118</sup> Between 2019 and 2020, Cresco Labs Inc claimed it spent nearly \$425 000 in staff hours and contributions toward restorative justice, including more than 90 hours of staffing at expungement events, sponsorship of 8 expungement events and 1 gun exchange, and assisting 22 restorative justice activations in California, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. Cresco Labs Inc reported assisting more than 1000 expungement seekers.<sup>92,119</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc contributed opening day proceeds from 4 store launches toward the Last Prisoner Project and Florida Rights Restoration Coalition,<sup>86-89,120</sup> and Cresco Labs Inc collected donations at 1 store for the Last Prisoner Project.<sup>94</sup>

**Hiring Initiatives Characterized as Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Cannabis companies developed initiatives nominally promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. These initiatives involved diversifying cannabis industry employment and promoting special populations (Table 3).<sup>77,80,90,91,96,97,101,104,121-132,134-142</sup> Both activities expanded industry

Table 3. Overview of CSR Activities Between 2012 and 2021 Regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion of the 9 Largest Multinational Cannabis Companies as of January 2021<sup>a</sup>

Company	CSR activity									
	Business incubators or business assistance	Scholarships, internships, and college certification programs	Brands with dedicated DEI funding	Donations from limited-edition product sales or product launches	Participation in DEI events	Internal DEI initiatives and policies	CSR programs with DEI focus	Job training	Joined trade associations or corporate pacts promoting DEI	Supplier diversity and business partnership initiatives
Curaleaf Holdings Inc	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>121</sup> 2020	NA	NA	PR Newswire, <sup>122</sup> 2020	NA	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>121</sup> 2021	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>121</sup> 2021	NA	NA	Ravilojan, <sup>80</sup> 2020; MENAFN, <sup>123</sup> 2021; Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>77</sup> 2021
Innovative Industrial Properties	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Business Wire, <sup>124</sup> 2021	NA	NA	NA	NA
Canopy Growth Corporation	NA	NA	NA	NA	No author, <sup>125</sup> 2019	Ravilojan, <sup>80</sup> 2020; Berke and Lee, <sup>126</sup> 2021; CNW Group Ltd, <sup>127</sup> 2021	NA	NA	Business Wire, <sup>128</sup> 2020; Lee and Dobby, <sup>129</sup> 2020	NA
Green Thumb Industries Inc	Hasse, <sup>101</sup> 2020; GlobeNewswire, <sup>104</sup> 2020	NA	NA	NA	NA	Green Thumb, <sup>90</sup> 2021	Green Thumb, <sup>90</sup> 2021	NA	GlobeNewswire, <sup>130</sup> 2021	NA
Cresco Labs Inc	Business Wire, <sup>91</sup> 2020; LARA Communications, <sup>131</sup> 2021	+ Beard, <sup>132</sup> 2020	NA	NA	No author, <sup>133</sup> 2020	NA	+No author, <sup>91</sup> 2020	NA	No author, <sup>96</sup> 2020	NA
Trulieve	NA	Beard, <sup>132</sup> 2020; PR Newswire, <sup>134</sup> 2021; Cision, <sup>135</sup> 2019	NA	Newstex Blogs, <sup>136</sup> 2019; Cision PR Newswire, <sup>137</sup> 2020; PR Newswire, <sup>138</sup> 2020	GlobeNewswire, <sup>139</sup> 2020	Trulieve, <sup>97</sup> 2021	NA	NA	MENAFN, <sup>96</sup> 2020	Trulieve, <sup>97</sup> 2021
Cronos Group Inc	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
GrowGeneration Corp	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Columbia Care	No author, <sup>140</sup> 2020	NA	NA	NA	NA	+ Ponieman, <sup>141</sup> 2021	NA	Ponieman, <sup>141</sup> 2021	NA	Business Wire, <sup>142</sup> 2019

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsibility; DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion; MENAFN, Middle East and North Africa Financial Network; NA, not applicable. <sup>a</sup> Citations link to company involvement in CSR activity.

involvement in communities through hiring, goodwill, and creating local retailers. Five companies reported internal diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Canopy Growth Corporation planned to create diversity benchmarks and report its progress<sup>80</sup>; we were unable to verify whether they implemented those plans. Curaleaf Holdings Inc created internal employee resource groups for minority, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, and queer plus), parent, and female employees<sup>143</sup> and established a diversity, equity, and inclusion task force.<sup>126</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc stated it would cultivate a diverse culture and workforce through equitable employment, salary, and promotional efforts; we did not find implemented plans.<sup>90</sup> Innovative Industrial Properties established a diversity, equality, and inclusion policy<sup>124</sup> but reported no activities.<sup>144</sup> Trulieve established a diversity, equity, and inclusion task force to build its workforce, partnerships, and events and diversify product suppliers.<sup>97</sup> Trulieve planned involvement in work fairs and internships to create a more diverse workforce and to train its employees in diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>97</sup> Cresco Labs Inc hosted a business workshop with Michigan's Marijuana Regulatory Agency as part of the agency's social equity program. Green Thumb Industries Inc and Cresco Labs Inc used business incubators and licensing programs<sup>91,92,101-104,113,117,145,146</sup> to help underrepresented groups establish businesses. Cresco Labs Inc held 13 incubator events in Illinois during 2019 and 2020 that served 255 people and 50 businesses, contributing 2062 staff hours and spending more than \$775 000 on licensing fees and incubator events.<sup>119</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc partnered with 1 minority-owned business and Women Grow, an organization supporting women in the cannabis industry, as part of its 420 × 25 supplier diversity initiative seeking to secure 420 product suppliers from underrepresented demographic groups in the cannabis industry by 2025.<sup>75,123,147</sup> (Curaleaf Holdings Inc claimed 60 community partnerships as of May 2021.<sup>148</sup>) Columbia Care<sup>107</sup> planned to partner with businesses owned by members of minority groups and women to support social equity initiatives in Illinois<sup>142</sup> and helped 2 social equity license applicants there develop applications with diversity and community engagement plans after purchasing minority stakes in their enterprises.<sup>140</sup> Trulieve<sup>132</sup> and Cresco Labs Inc<sup>132</sup> sponsored the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Cannabis Equity Initiative seeking to increase Black employment in the cannabis industry. Trulieve provided \$15 000 for internships and \$20 000 for scholarships administered by the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, the largest Black college organization serving 47 member institutions, to prepare students for cannabis industry careers.<sup>134</sup> Trulieve and Cresco Labs Inc claimed involvement with National Cannabis Roundtable efforts emphasizing improving industry equity.<sup>96</sup> Four companies promoted to special populations by partnering with nonprofits, participating in events, and fundraising using special products. Canopy Growth Corporation<sup>125</sup> and Trulieve<sup>139</sup> sponsored or participated in LGBTQ celebrations. Trulieve sold special edition products, including limited edition Pride products<sup>136,137</sup> and TruSwag,<sup>138</sup> to raise funds for LGBTQ organizations. Curaleaf Holdings Inc contributed to social justice, equity, and women's organizations,<sup>122</sup> and Canopy Growth Corporation<sup>128,129</sup> and Green Thumb Industries Inc<sup>130</sup> participated in campaigns addressing systemic racism, usually with business coalitions.

### Making Charitable Contributions

Seven companies made charitable contributions at national, state, and local levels (eTable 2 in the Supplement).<sup>76,79,100,149-191</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation's<sup>173</sup> national efforts focused on fundraising for education,<sup>173</sup> breast cancer,<sup>154,155</sup> mental health,<sup>192</sup> and veterans.<sup>79,169</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc targeted breast cancer,<sup>154,155</sup> selling pink "Pre-rolls With a Purpose" and pink vaporizer pens with plans to dedicate some proceeds to breast cancer nonprofit organizations in 9 states.<sup>155</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc joined the Ice Bucket Challenge to raise funds for research and treatment of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, sold limited edition Rhythm for a Cause vaporizer pens through its dispensaries, and partnered with organizations in 3 states to promote breast cancer awareness.<sup>182</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc indicated it would donate store opening proceeds to the National Giving Alliance, dedicated to helping low-income and homeless persons.<sup>181</sup> Green Thumb Industries Inc donated more than \$34 000 from Dogwalker product sales to 5 animal shelters<sup>183</sup> and partnered



with American Corporate Partners, an organization helping veterans transition to civilian life.<sup>179</sup> GrowGeneration Corp announced a partnership with Whole Food's Whole Cities Foundation to donate hydroponics to local community gardens in the US.<sup>191</sup> As part of Cresco Lab Inc's Make a Difference initiative, employees participated in 75 activities that the company claimed benefitted more than 50 communities across 8 states.<sup>188,193</sup> Five companies assisted COVID-19 pandemic relief efforts during 2020. Canopy Growth Corporation gave \$20 000 to Wounded Warriors Canada's trauma therapy programs and its mental health assistance related to COVID-19.<sup>79</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation also donated personal protective equipment, converted facilities to produce hand sanitizer, and gave Ontario, Canada, 40 000 surgical masks and 25 000 N95 masks. Canopy Growth Corporation's subsidiary BioSteel Sports Nutrition Inc contributed \$2 million in hydration mix to US and Canadian emergency workers.<sup>176-178</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc gave frontline workers food.<sup>76</sup> Trulieve donated more than 150 computers to assist distance learning in racial and ethnic minority communities.<sup>189</sup> Cresco Labs Inc pledged to hire 250 COVID-19-affected workers, and stated it would pay employees extra during the pandemic.<sup>100</sup> GrowGeneration Corp pledged as much as \$500 000 in equipment to communities and customers affected by COVID-19.<sup>190</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation, Curaleaf Holdings Inc, Green Thumb Industries Inc, Innovative Industrial Properties, and Trulieve announced or participated in local philanthropic initiatives, including job training,<sup>158,172</sup> community causes,<sup>135,159-162,171,187,189</sup> food banks,<sup>149-151,163-167,180,184,194</sup> homeless shelters,<sup>168</sup> women's services,<sup>195</sup> a campaign to raise funds for Ronald McDonald charities in Canada<sup>170</sup> (founded by and affiliated with executives of the McDonald's Corporation, a transnational fast food company<sup>196,197</sup>), animal shelters,<sup>183-185</sup> veteran organizations,<sup>153</sup> a reforestation organization,<sup>152,198,199</sup> housing,<sup>200</sup> and social equity and antipoverty nonprofits.<sup>76,179,188,193,194</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc<sup>76,149</sup> and Green Thumb Industries Inc<sup>179,180,184,195</sup> planned or claimed to donate proceeds from retail store openings to local charities. Two companies incorporated their CSR programs, with Curaleaf Holdings Inc announcing it would contribute to Black Owned Maine's family relief program as part of its Rooted in Good platform and store opening,<sup>76</sup> and to food charities as part of its Feed the Block initiative.<sup>76,149-151</sup> Trulieve employees locally volunteered for its Make a Difference initiative.<sup>188</sup>

### Researching Potential Therapeutic Uses of Cannabis and Increasing Access to Medical Cannabis

Two companies promoted cannabis' medical utility (eTable 1 in the [Supplement](#)). Canopy Growth Corporation funded research investigating whether medical cannabis treated sleep disorders<sup>201</sup> or mental health conditions.<sup>192,202</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation and Columbia Care funded studies on whether cannabis could serve as therapy for opioid misuse<sup>79,202</sup> or an alternative pain treatment.<sup>203</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation offered cannabis education programs for physicians from at least 2016 to 2019<sup>204-206</sup> and partnered with the Canadian AIDS Society, an organization representing local Canadian AIDS and HIV groups,<sup>207</sup> to develop medical cannabis treatment protocols for chronic pain.<sup>79,208</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation partnered with the Beckley Foundation, a drug reform and psychedelic research think tank,<sup>209</sup> to form Beckley Canopy Therapeutics to research cannabis-based medicines.<sup>208</sup> Three companies sought expanded medical access. Trulieve's TruVet connected veterans with medical cannabis prescribers.<sup>210</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc planned to fund the Veterans Cannabis Project, a nonprofit organization increasing veteran access to medical cannabis,<sup>211,212</sup> by dedicating proceeds from branded prerolls.<sup>213</sup> The nonprofit identified Curaleaf Holdings Inc as 1 of 3 partners.<sup>214</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation funded a national patient survey conducted in July and August 2020 in partnership with Medical Cannabis Canada,<sup>79</sup> a volunteer-run medical cannabis access nonprofit.<sup>215</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation sought the survey to lower medical use barriers and gain access to academic institutions, nonprofit organizations, and government officials.<sup>79</sup>

### Efforts That Claimed to Address the Harms of Cannabis Legalization

Three companies used CSR activities that they claimed combatted youth use or drugged driving (Table 4).<sup>77,79,124,216-228</sup> Cronos Group Inc<sup>226,227</sup> and Cresco Labs Inc<sup>222</sup> developed marketing regulations that they claimed reduced advertising exposure and appeal to youths. Canopy Growth Corporation developed youth prevention materials with Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy and Parent Action on Drugs.<sup>79,219-221</sup> Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy was a former chapter of international grassroots drug policy reform organization<sup>229</sup> Students for Sensible Drug Policy.<sup>230,231</sup> Parent Action on Drugs, which was created in 1983 to prevent use of drugs and alcohol by youths, disbanded in 2019 due to insufficient funding.<sup>174</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation framed its youth prevention programming as helping youths<sup>221</sup> and "young adults make healthy, responsible decisions on the use of cannabis."<sup>220</sup> Canopy Growth Corporation also partnered with Mothers Against Drunk Driving Canada to sponsor advertisements discouraging cannabis-influenced driving.<sup>79,219-221</sup>

Six companies claimed they were mitigating their environmental impacts by reducing product waste<sup>175</sup> and pollution.<sup>232,233</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc formed a sustainability committee.<sup>77</sup> Trulieve and GrowGeneration Corp were among 17 cofounders of the Sustainable Cannabis Coalition trade association.<sup>223-225,228</sup> In 2019, Canopy Growth Corporation partnered with recycling company TerraCycle to pilot a recycling program for cannabis packaging in Canada, collecting more than 1 million pieces of waste.<sup>216,217</sup> In 2020, Canopy Growth Corporation and Cronos Group Inc piloted a program with the Cannabis Council of Canada to collect cannabis vaping devices for recycling.<sup>218</sup> Curaleaf Holdings Inc and Green Thumb Industries Inc listed sustainability as CSR program pillars.<sup>90,121</sup> Innovative Industrial Properties, which sells real estate to medical cannabis companies,<sup>48,49</sup> claimed it was sustainable because it reused existing properties over construction.<sup>124</sup>

**Table 4. Overview of CSR Activities Between 2012 and 2021 to Address Cannabis Legalization Harms Among the 9 Largest Multinational Cannabis Companies as of January 2021<sup>a</sup>**

Company	Sustainability	Youth use prevention	Youth marketing prevention	Drugged driving prevention
Curaleaf Holdings Inc	Curaleaf Holdings Inc, <sup>77</sup> 2021	NA	NA	NA
Innovative Industrial Properties	Business Wire, <sup>124</sup> 2021	NA	NA	NA
Canopy Growth Corporation	PR Newswire, <sup>216</sup> 2019; Agriculture XPRT, <sup>217</sup> 2019; Canada NewsWire, <sup>218</sup> 2020	Canopy Growth Corporation, <sup>79</sup> ND; Rivera, <sup>219</sup> 2017; no author, <sup>220</sup> 2018; PR Newswire, <sup>221</sup> 2019	NA	Canopy Growth Corporation, <sup>79</sup> ND; Rivera, <sup>219</sup> 2017; no author, <sup>220</sup> 2018; PR Newswire, <sup>221</sup> 2019
Green Thumb Industries Inc	NA	NA	NA	NA
Cresco Labs Inc	NA	NA	Cresco Labs Inc, <sup>222</sup> 2020	NA
Trulieve	Sustainable Cannabis Coalition, <sup>223</sup> 2021; PR Newswire, <sup>224</sup> 2021; Berke and Lee, <sup>225</sup> 2021	NA	NA	NA
Cronos Group Inc	Canada NewsWire, <sup>218</sup> 2020	NA	Cronos Group, <sup>226</sup> 2021; Cronos Group, <sup>227</sup> ND	NA
GrowGeneration Corp	Sustainable Cannabis Coalition, <sup>223</sup> 2021; PR Newswire, <sup>224</sup> 2021; Berke and Lee, <sup>225</sup> 2021; PR Newswire, <sup>228</sup> 2021	NA	NA	NA
Columbia Care	NA	NA	NA	NA

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsibility; NA, not applicable; ND, no date.

<sup>a</sup> Citations link to company involvement in CSR activity.

## Discussion

Our results suggest CSR activities of cannabis companies are similar to those of the tobacco industry, which enabled the latter to recruit customers and allies, encourage consumption, expand markets, legitimize its product, and deter regulation. Cannabis company donations to and partnerships with advocacy organizations could generate goodwill and consumption among minority and LGBTQ+ communities, a tactic tobacco companies have used to market to those groups.<sup>234-236</sup> Collaboration with and funding of advocacy organizations have also been used historically by tobacco companies to form partnerships that allowed them to build policy coalitions supporting their agenda<sup>27,236,237</sup> (eg, opposing taxes). Cannabis companies also created business partnerships that could expand their reach. Although social equity programs developed by state governments allocate licenses to communities and individuals impacted by criminalization,<sup>238</sup> they often impose regulatory and financial barriers.<sup>239-241</sup> Proof currently exists that some cannabis companies assisted social equity license applicants in exchange for control of proposed businesses,<sup>238,242-244</sup> providing the businesses with increased market access. Cannabis companies have publicized CSR activities similar to those of the tobacco industry, which has previously used such concerns to generate reasons for policy engagement with government officials.<sup>27,41,245</sup> Industry research on cannabis as an opioid substitute and to treat mental health disorders and insomnia mirrored tobacco industry pharmaceuticalization,<sup>32,246</sup> the strategy of selling nicotine replacement therapy to legitimize tobacco company products as therapeutic.<sup>32</sup> Pharmaceuticalization may normalize and promote cannabis as a health or medical treatment akin to the tobacco industry's sale of nicotine replacement therapy, possibly providing cannabis companies additional markets to increase consumption and profits. Cannabis company CSR activities regarding youth prevention, cannabis-influenced driving, and sustainability shared commonalities with CSR activities of the tobacco industry, portraying companies as addressing harmful business effects while sidestepping concerns. The tobacco industry has used youth prevention,<sup>28,29</sup> marketing,<sup>28,247</sup> and environmental<sup>248</sup> CSR programs to displace effective educational programs and regulation.<sup>249</sup> Cannabis companies stated that youth prevention programming helped prevent preteen cannabis use<sup>220,221</sup> without messaging against consumption and promoted recycling while avoiding occupational risks arising from workplace exposure to toxins<sup>250,251</sup> and secondhand smoke exposure where cannabis is consumed.<sup>252,253</sup> Prevention programming directed at youths by the tobacco industry was historically less effective than government prevention programming and promoted youth consumption via forbidden fruit messaging.<sup>28,29</sup> In the US, youths had a 12.8% rate of current cannabis use compared with 15.4% rate of electronic cigarette use and a 3.3% rate of combustible cigarette use in January through June 2021.<sup>254</sup> These higher prevalence rates warrant public health messaging that discourages use and avoids normalizing consumption. Cannabis industry promotion of recycling and sustainability programs may divert attention from adoption of regulations preventing harmful environmental pollution. A comparable case is tobacco industry campaigns encouraging individuals to pick up cigarette butts,<sup>255</sup> the largest source of litter globally,<sup>256</sup> rather than accepting responsibility for manufacturing products that are not environmentally sustainable and modifying production practices.

## Limitations

This study has some limitations. We included cannabis companies with the largest market capitalizations, which are not necessarily reflective of the entire industry. The publicly available materials included in our analysis are likely incomplete. We excluded video broadcasts and social media posts, potentially affecting our results because social media platforms are used by companies to advertise as well as promote their CSR activities.<sup>257</sup> Despite these limitations, our findings provide detail on CSR strategies pursued by cannabis companies, including similarities with tobacco companies. Further study is warranted regarding cannabis companies' use of CSR to influence regulation, improve public image, and secure market access. Little or no research on marketing

codes, sustainability, employee protections, and diversity within the industry has been performed, including whether incubator programs provide applicants with full business autonomy. Additional research is also needed to address the reasons cannabis companies choose to focus on some issues and exclude others in their CSR activities (eg, increased focus on sustainability and pollution compared with drugged driving by adolescents). Otañez and Vergara<sup>35</sup> note that additional research using qualitative interviews as well as quantitative employee and customer surveys are needed to understand certain CSR activities by individual businesses. Ju et al<sup>37</sup> also state that communications staff at cannabis companies should be interviewed to determine CSR intentions and drivers. Forzely<sup>36</sup> suggested that CSR should be incorporated as part of the 7C Framework to better analyze cannabis industry marketing methods. Additionally, Paul<sup>38</sup> posited that community infrastructure theory and media systems dependency models may be used to understand development and consumption of CSR messages. These approaches could be expanded in the future to explore CSR foci and intentions among larger companies in a scope similar to that of our study.

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## Conclusions

Cannabis legalization is expanding,<sup>258,259</sup> making understanding how cannabis companies legitimize themselves critical. Industry motivation to increase consumption makes policies difficult to modify once established.<sup>260</sup> Public health actors have been wary of industry CSR activities, given research demonstrating such programs are ineffectual by design and advance corporate interests.<sup>261</sup> Similarly, cannabis companies appear to use CSR activities that normalize and legitimize the industry. US cannabis companies have sought to open markets and influence regulations,<sup>262-264</sup> and Canadian companies have attempted to reduce taxes and regulation,<sup>10,265</sup> making societal approval critical. Public health proponents should challenge these attempts to influence policy and adopt strong protective measures.

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#### SUPPLEMENT.

**eTable 1.** Overview of CSR Activities Between 2012 and 2021 Regarding Medical Cannabis Access and Utility as a Treatment of the 9 Largest Multinational Cannabis Companies as of January 2021

**eTable 2.** Overview of General CSR Activity Categories and Charity Focuses Between 2012 and 2021 Among the 9 Largest Multinational Cannabis Companies as of January 2021