Data Diary:

1: We are going to try to map the drug complaints following the passage of the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act in 2021.

Important Background information: Cannabis use was first decriminalized on August 28, 2019: <https://www.cssny.org/pages/marijuana-decriminalization-fact-sheet>

It was then fully legalized by the MRTA on March 31, 2021: <https://cannabis.ny.gov/marihuana-regulation-and-taxation-act-mrta>

2.However, cannabis sales are still illegal without a retail license. The first provisional licenses were issued in November 2022.

As a result, there is some ambiguity about how cannabis-related complaints should be lodged. Depending on the age of the smoker, the exact activity (use or sales), and the location, a cannabis-related complaint may be logged as either Drug Activity or a Smoking Violation.

<https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-02295>

<https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-03378>

<https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-03379>

These activities may fall under the oversight of the NYPD, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, or the Office of Cannabis Management. To make matters more complicated, the OCM does not yet have a complaints-receiving process.

3. First step: Download the database of 311 Service Calls from NYC Open Data, which has almost every service call since 2010. The website notes that, due to the complexity of the system, this may not exhaustively represent every service call.

To ensure we have all the data we need, I downloaded all data related to either smoking violations or drug activity. This was about 53,000 rows of data.

Both smoking and drug activity calls increased after the passage of the MRTA. However, drug calls increased by a much larger factor:

Chart, line chart, histogram

Description automatically generated

The next step is to sort through the data. I created a pivot table representing all drug calls in the year 2022, sortedby community board.

There’s one area in particular that stands out: CB 08 in Queens, with 2804 drug calls in the past year. That’s almost 5 times as many as the next community board, Manhattan 11, with 593.

To make things interesting, the vast majority of drug calls that CB originate from a single address: the Street/Sidewalk outside of Queens Hospital Center at 82-68 164th Street.

Step 4: I visit the hospital to investigate the outlier. There are no signs of drug activity. Streetside vendors and hospital workers are very surprised to hear anything about drugs.

“Go check down Jamaica Avenue,” says a man at the deli. “There’s nothing here.”

Repeated calls/messages to the hospital’s external affairs manager go unanswered.

Step 5. I call the community board. They forward me to someone from the 107th precinct. Here is what he tells me: