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# CANNABIZ LEGACY

Social Incubator for the Cannabis Industry in NYC

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# SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Global drug policy has traditionally taken a prohibitionist stance towards various substances like cannabis and cocaine. Even alcohol experienced a period of prohibition in the early 20th century\*.

Over the last thirty years, different countries and states have adopted diverse substance regulation and public policy approaches. This trend began with European nations like the Netherlands and Portugal. This shift was driven by recognizing that the ongoing "war on drugs" wasn't deterring substance consumption. Instead, it fostered negative social and economic consequences, including ineffective law enforcement measures against transnational criminal groups and disproportionately incarcerated individuals, particularly from black and brown communities\*.

In 2012, a significant turning point emerged with the potential decriminalization of cannabis use in Colorado and Washington\*. This move aimed to lessen punitive repercussions and established a highly regulated market for cannabis, surpassing even the control measures for alcohol and tobacco.

In 2021, New York State embarked on a similar path by enacting the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA)\*. This legislation decriminalized adult cannabis use and introduced an innovative approach. It prioritizes granting licenses for cultivation, processing, and retail sales to communities disproportionately affected by the war on drugs.

**1961**

United Nations Adopted the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, establishing the beginning of the War on Drugs

**2001**

Portugal decriminalized the personal use and possession of all drugs and pivoted towards a harm reduction approach

**2012**

Colorado and Washington became the first two states to legalize the recreational use of cannabis

**2021**

New York State signed the Marihuana Regulation and Taxation Act, legalizing adult-use cannabis

**2022**

CAURD (Conditional Adult Use Retail Dispensary) program launched, seeking to grant licenses to communities impacted by the war on drugs

1. Daniels, C., Aluso, A., Burke-Shyne, N. et al. Decolonizing drug policy. *Harm Reduct J* 18, 120 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-021-00564-7>  
2. Crandall, Russell. *Drugs and Thugs: The History and Future of America's War on Drugs*. Yale University Press, 2020. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv177tk3n>.

# CHALLENGES BEHIND THE PUBLIC POLICY

African Americans were

## 7 times

More likely to be arrested for marijuana possession in 2018

Hispanic people were

## 6 times

More likely to be arrested for marijuana possession in 2018

## All races

And ethnic groups consume in the same rates according to FBI

Communities impacted by the war on drugs lack access to information, networks and funding to become entrepreneurs

The Office of Cannabis Management in New York has established a strategy prioritizing applicants affected by the criminal justice system. This strategy involves granting licenses for farming, processing, and retail to previously incarcerated individuals due to cannabis-related arrests or charges. It also includes those whose families were negatively impacted by such convictions, potentially leading to separation.

This approach is rooted in a wealth of evidence highlighting the justice system's disproportionate impact on black and brown communities, despite similar rates of cannabis consumption across all ethnic groups\*.

While policymakers have integrated a social equity approach, it's crucial to acknowledge that obtaining a license marks just the initial step on a challenging path to becoming an entrepreneur. Under typical circumstances, this journey necessitates access to information, funding, and networks to thrive within the industry. These are resources that individuals from the most affected communities are likely lacking.

\*Source: <https://innocenceproject.org/news/racial-disparities-in-nyc-arrest-data-marijuana-possession/>





## The Community:

We interviewed around 35 individuals from justice-impacted communities, who had already sold cannabis when it was not regulated, had convictions for possession, whose families suffered trauma because of violence or separations and, in some cases, a combination of all of the conditions above. Additionally, we interviewed activists, regulators, leaders of social organizations and academics researching the legalization landscape.

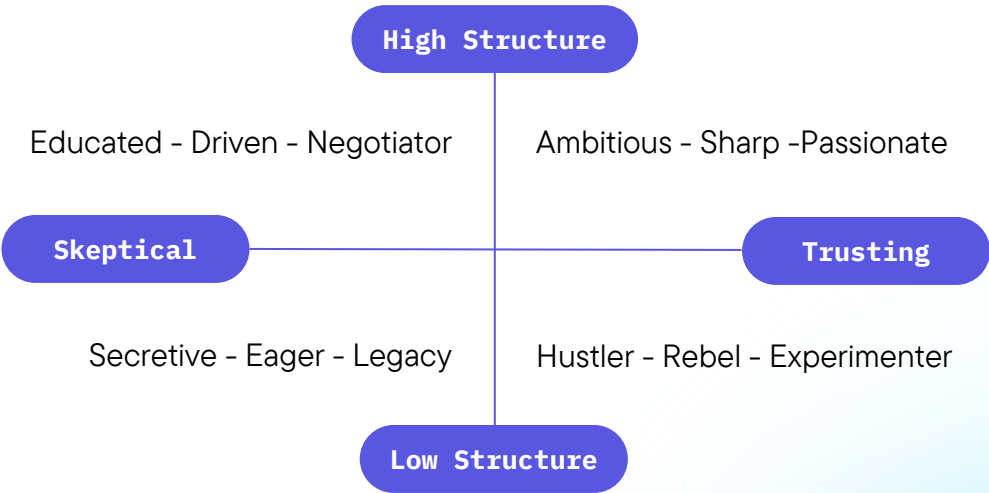


# LEGACY OPERATORS

After the interviews and research exercises, we identified the so-called "Legacy Operators;" people who sold marijuana before its legalization. Experienced individuals who established a reputation before legalization by knowing the product and advising customers. Some had arrests or convictions for possession, while others did not, preventing them from applying to the state programs.

The CAURD program created by the New York State prioritized justice-impacted population to access priority licensing offering a reparations scheme. We identified a significant aspect that impacted the program: the resistance to trust, creating communication barriers between regulators and the targeted communities.

## Legacy Operator's Mindsets



## Framework for analysis

**Structure:** The awareness of the entrepreneurial tools required to transition to a legal industry. During our conversations, some accessed various education resources or consulting services to supplement the weak areas that posed barriers around legal, financial, product and supply chain needs. In contrast, others considered their previous experience was enough to face the new legalized market.

**Trust:** Interviewed participants claimed to have suffered trauma to some degree, because of incarceration, family separation, violence or discrimination. The individual combination of these conditions, along with personality traits, created a mindset where they supported or rejected the regulators' efforts, seeing the process as an opportunity or an inefficient process that would not benefit the community in the long run.

# CHALLENGES OF ENTREPRENEURISM

Some of the main insights uncovered by the research process were:

**1. Legacy Operators desire to tell stories of redemption through their businesses.**

Their journey as entrepreneurs is the pathway to rewrite their past, which is deeply intertwined with cannabis and past traumas around it. They fear the new regulation will make them invisible again.

**3. Having grown up in an illegal sphere, legacy operators hold on to a mindset of mistrust rooted in past traumas**

The disbelief in the system impedes them from collaborating and uncapping the potential they could achieve to stand in front of a more consolidated market.

**2. Underrepresented communities who do not qualify for social equity programs feel they are in a grey area**

They can not apply for early access licenses and therefore lose opportunities to get funds. The communication gap made them perceive the government's intention in disbelief.

**4. Legacy operators need to be aware of the skills required to be competitive in this emerging market**

The new market involves law, bureaucracy and challenging financial protocols. The lack of business tools maintains the systemic inequalities and makes them appear illegitimate in investors' eyes.

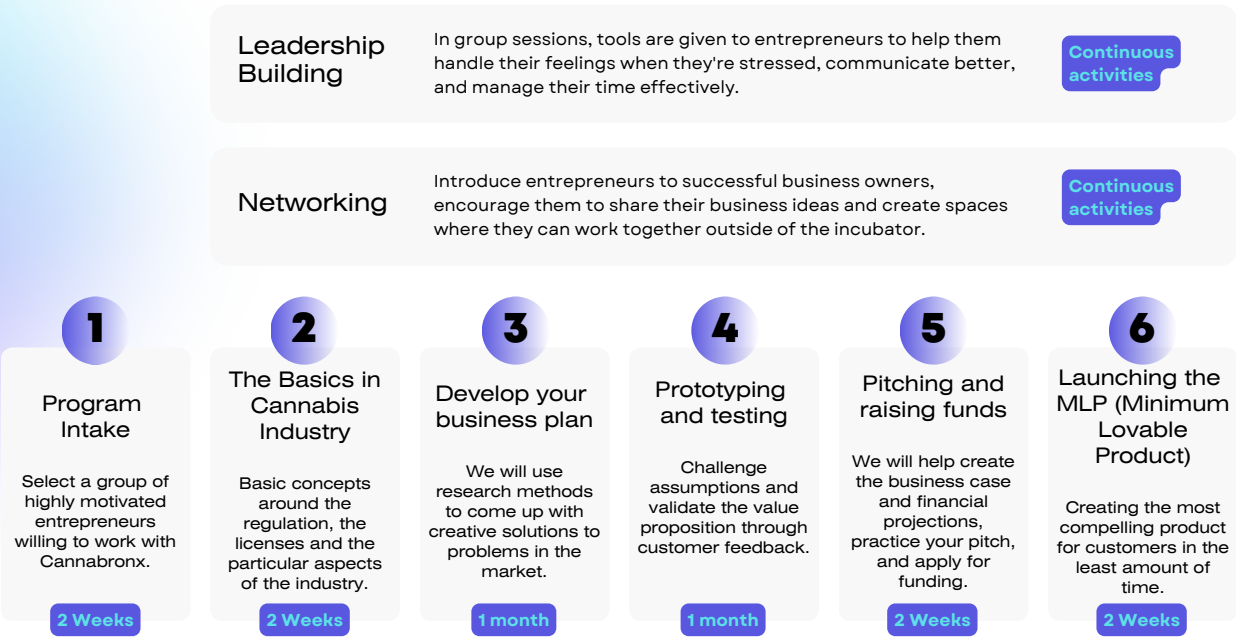




# INCUBATOR PROGRAM

After conducting multiple ideation sessions and validating some of the concepts with community leaders, the idea of a social incubator became more relevant. We found that pain points gravitated around the lack of entrepreneurial education, networking and mentorship, and access to funding.

## Incubator Program Structure



### Ancillary Businesses:

As an alternative to traditional dispensaries, which require higher amounts of capital, we proposed to enter the industry with alternative business ideas related to services.

### Networking and Coaching:

Create events where seasoned entrepreneurs help newcomers navigate the industry's particularities. Foster a net of cohorts where entrepreneurs providing different services can support students with practical advice.

### Leadership Coaching:

Trauma-informed group and individual interventions that address the mistrust and secretive behavior inherited from the illegal landscape to help the transition to legalization

### Business Acumen:

Provide the financial, operations and design tools that allow entrepreneurs to create a unique and context-relevant product/service. Leverage the power of experiments to de-risk the project proposals.

# JEMEZ PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

The forefront of the Tishman Center work lies in the importance of creating accountable, non-extractive relationships with communities.

The community of justice-impacted population in NYC deserves a respectful and dignified mode of collaboration to foster trust, generate contribution spaces and think of a more hopeful future where the community feels empowered to drive their goals with the help of strategic design methods.

The Jemez principles guided our work with different stakeholders, creating conversations and supporting the effort of advocates and activists working in this space that has been tainted for many years by stigma, violence and discrimination.

## 1 Be Inclusive

Interviewing all kinds of stakeholders, creating a safe space for them to share their stories, concerns and expectations about the legalization process.

## 2 Emphasis on Bottom-Up Organizing

Have conversations with owners of established businesses and entrepreneurs discovering their path into the industry. In particular we became curious about cooperatives.

## 3 Let People Speak for Themselves

We prioritized organizations from the most harmed locations in NYC. Our collaboration fostered relationships with Cannabronx and Mothers on the Move.

## 4 Work Together In Solidarity and Mutuality

We held multiple co-creation and evaluation sessions where stakeholders guided us to propose a program tailored to New York's history.

## 5 Build Just Relationships Among Ourselves

An emphasis on reducing stigma, respecting people's stories, and being honest about the usage of the information shared was a constant.

## 6 Commitment to Self-Transformation

We gave out the project for implementation to Cannabronx. They will benefit from the research and be free to implement it accordingly.

# CANNABIZ LEGACY FUTURE

We partnered with Cannabronx, an organization recently created with the support of Mothers on The Move, a non-profit with 30+ years of experience working with the Bronx community.



## Program Validation

We invited legacy operators and community members to a potluck to discuss their expectations and share their stories. We introduced the incubator program to determine alignment and answer questions.

## Fundraising Support

Partnered with BCDI (Bronx Community Development Initiative) to finalize a deck to raise funds through grants and generated a request for interest from other organizations willing to participate in the incubator.





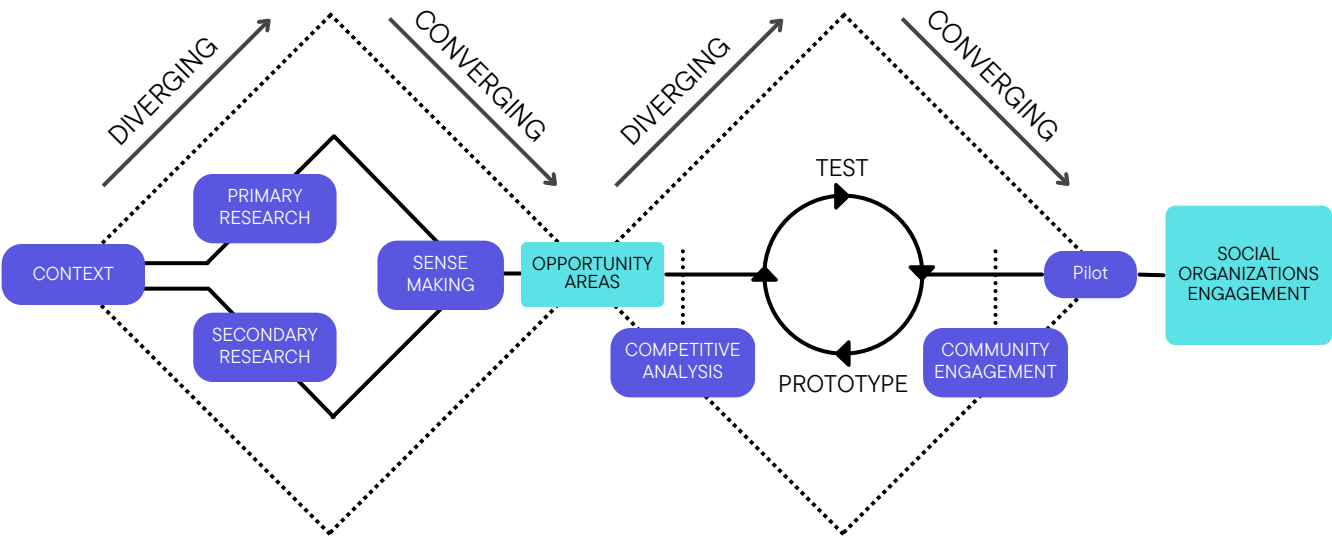
# RESEARCH & DESIGN PROCESS

The project implemented a strategic design approach, with multiple phases of research that included methods from anthropology and psychology.

As group we included multiple sense-making and ideation sessions that informed the following methods to navigate this space.

A difference from other traditional strategic design processes is the engagement with community conversations and dynamics.

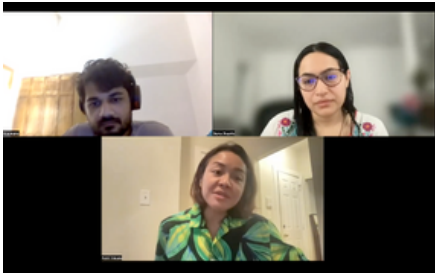
Since this controversial topic involves stakeholders connected to law and policy making, we also engaged with activists and other social organizations.



Workshops



Interviews



Ethnographies



# GLOBAL DRUG POLICY

This project inspired a conversation around the legalization of drug markets, entrepreneurship for reparations and regenerative farming practices.

With the support of the Open Society Foundations, we organized a delegation visit from Colombia, Mexico and Brazil.

The group included members of the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Supreme Court, the United Nations and two NGOs and Think Tanks from those countries.

The exchange aimed to show New York's broad landscape and approach toward legalizing adult-use cannabis.

The visit did not pretend to influence policymakers and social organizations in those countries but gave a broader look at each country's challenges and processes.



Poster at the Housing Works cannabis licensed dispensary



Dispensary Backoffice



Conference Day



License Holder's Dinner



# Exchange Structure

The event layout was designed so that the Latin America delegation could have conversations with regulators such as OCM (Office of Cannabis Management) and SBS (Small Business Services), as well as with license holders and farmers by hearing their life stories. The goal was to provide a balanced narrative about the challenges and next steps in public policy and the impact of those decisions in private and community lives.

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
Polymakers	Social Organizations & Advocates	Regenerative Agriculture Farm Visit	Indoor Farm Visit
1st Licensed Dispensary	2nd Licensed Dispensary	Organic Farm Visit	Prevention of Harm Reduction Site
	Dinner with CAURD Licensed Holders		



Visit to the Drug Policy Alliance



Dinner with CAURD License Holders



Visit to Back Home Farm - Organic & Local Farming



Visit to On Point - Overdose Prevention Center



# THANK YOU

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[www.cannabizlegacy.com](http://www.cannabizlegacy.com)