

# Illicit Drugs

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## AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN ILLCIT DRUGS HEALTH AND AGEING

*The Australian Democrats do not endorse illegal drug use but recognise that drug use is an undeniable part of many people's lives. Open and honest debate about the health and social impacts of each and every drug that is used and/or abused is necessary to tackle the extent and effects of drug use.*

*The objective of drug policy must be to discourage drug use and to lessen the harmful effects of drugs on health, society and the economy. Drug policy must be based on the best available evidence, avoiding sensationalising, moralising and fear mongering.*

### Our Action Plan

*"Harm Minimisation is not about condoning drug use, nor is it a 'soft' approach to drug use. It is about taking alcohol and other drug related harm seriously and working towards preventing anticipated harm and reducing actual harm"*

**Dr Neal Blewett, Alcohol  
and other Drug Council of  
Australia (ADCA)  
President"**

- more information and education programmes on the effects of drug use, tailored to different groups of drug users and available in a range of settings, with a particular focus on young people and specifically including
  - initiatives to increase community awareness of the harms associated with cannabis use, including links to mental health problems
  - a major education campaign on club drugs
- more funding for treatment and support and rehabilitation services, with increased flexibility for those that cater for drug dependent adults with children
- expand supervised detoxification facilities
- expand specific drug courts and diversion programs that offer an alternative to the traditional justice system
- targeted training for health, welfare and criminal justice professionals in responding to inhalant abuse and the comprehensive roll out of non-sniffable fuel throughout regions of Australia where petrol sniffing is a problem
- introduce a regulatory framework for the prescription of pharmaceutical cannabis for therapeutic purposes
- continue investment in needle and syringe exchange programmes and support medically supervised injection centres where needed
- continue methadone maintenance treatment for the majority of people addicted to heroin, with research into medical prescription of heroin in some circumstances

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- fund further research into the availability of naltrexone - oral and implanted - as a non-addictive alternative to methadone
- research into the medium to long term effects of the use of designer club drugs such as ecstasy and speed and effective preventative and harm reduction interventions and treatments for designer drug use and addiction
- increased resources for indigenous substance use programmes

## The Issues

All drugs have the potential to cause harm. Unfortunately much of the debate about drug policy is dominated by discussion on whether particular drugs should be decriminalised (if not legalised) and confusion and misrepresentation of the harm minimisation position. This distracts attention from improving our knowledge and understanding of both drug use and its consequences and the best ways to prevent drug use and to minimise harm.

People who use illicit drugs come from a variety of backgrounds. Users may be professionals who take designer drug pills at parties and do not necessarily see themselves as 'drug users', through to marginalised drug users who inject heroin.

Although there has been some decline in the use of marijuana in recent years, it remains the most frequently used illegal drug in Australia, with 800 000 Australians aged 14 and over using the drug each week. Young people are starting to use cannabis at an earlier age and more frequent use is also being reported among young people. There is increasing evidence of the links between cannabis use and mental health problems.

Rates of use for other illicit substances are much lower than for marijuana. While the rates of use for most illicit substances are relatively low, the consequences for misuse of these drugs can be quite devastating for the individual, their family and the community.

Drug use—both licit and illicit—is associated with crime and violence, sexual assault, domestic violence, and also impacts on health through premature death, injury and illness.

Although the vast majority of drug related harm in Australia comes from alcohol and tobacco use, there remains around 120,000 heroin users and illicit drug use has been estimated to cost the Australian community more than \$6 billion a year when the costs of crime, health, lost productivity and road accidents are taken into account<sup>2</sup>.

The major health problems caused by the use of illicit drugs are associated with injection, either drug related overdoses or the transmission of blood borne diseases.

There is little reliable evidence on the medium to long term effects of the newer designer drugs or of multiple drug use, and little is known about the best ways of preventing use of these substances.

Social factors, such as unemployment, low income and insecure housing, play a role in drug use and drug-related harm, although the exact process is unclear.



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