

YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



# RECONSIDERING AUSTRALIA'S APPROACH TO DRUG ADDICTIONS

---

POLICY BRIEF - ALYSSA COLLYVAS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

Drug addiction is an issue that impacts the lives of many Australians. As of 2019, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that the use of illicit substances in Australia is increasing. [1] The current response of the Australian Government in handling drug addictions is a 'tough on drugs', law and order approach. This approach does not seem to be proving beneficial in treating and reducing drug addictions within Australia, with a number of health experts both within Australia and internationally recommending a public health response to treat drug addictions as a more productive alternative.

In order to treat the struggles many Australians face with drug addictions, it is recommended that the Australian Government:

1. Allocate further funding to researching drug addictions.
2. Allocate further funding to public health resources.
3. Consider decriminalising illicit drugs.

## BACKGROUND

---

Australian Governments of the past have all had varying views and policies relating to drug possession and use. However, the National Illicit Drug Strategy, implemented in 1997 by then Prime Minister John Howard, adopted a zero-tolerance approach to drug use and was a significant catalyst for the successive policies of future Australia Governments, such as those implemented by the current Government[2].

At the crux of the current Australian Government's plan to address drug issues within Australia is their focus on "attack[ing] the scourge of drugs"[3]. The Government discuss their action on drugs in the context of criminal punishment and, when outlining their plan to combat Australia's drug problem, highlight their belief in drug testing welfare recipients as a major element of this plan[4].

The effectiveness of this current approach to drug addictions is questionable. In 2017, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that drug related deaths were at their highest rate in Australia since the late 1990s[5]. As of 2018-19, there was an 80% increase of national illicit drug arrests as opposed to the same style of arrests from the previous decade[6].

---

Many health and criminal experts are calling for the Australian Government, and international governments with similar stances on drugs, to reconsider their positions on drugs and to replace them with a health-focused approach. These experts include the World Health Organisation (WHO), who endeavour to address the issue of drug use and addiction through assisting countries in improving how they respond to drug issues in a public health context” [7], and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) [8], as well as Australian legal and criminal experts such as former supreme court judges, directors of public prosecution, heads of corrective services and police commissioners. [9]

A public health led approach to drug addictions has been used by numerous countries in various ways across past decades. In 1986, Switzerland became the first country to open a medically supervised injecting centre. [10] In Portugal, illicit substances are completely decriminalised, with the country’s focus on harm reduction and health led treatment as opposed to criminal punishment resulting in less than 30 people a year dying from drug overdoses. [11] Heading into 2018, the Norwegian Government began to work on decriminalising drug use and possession, aiming to provide swift health assistance to drug users instead of criminal punishments. [12]

# THE PROBLEM

---

The Australian Government's approach to addressing drug addictions in Australia does not seem to be effective, or at least as effective as possible alternative approaches.

The problem with the current approach to drug use and addictions is that by focusing on punishment as opposed to harm reduction and treatment, the government misses the opportunity to address drug addictions at their root cause, which can assist in treating current drug addictions and preventing more.

Root causes of drug addictions that can go untreated if they are not addressed are brain changes that occur from even singular or minimal use of drugs [13], mental illnesses that increase one's risk of consuming and becoming addicted to drugs [14], as well as trauma resulting from physical and sexual abuse, among many others. [15]

With the use of illicit drugs on an increase in Australia, how the Australian Government chooses to address drug issues will greatly impact the wellbeing and lives of Australians struggling with drug addictions as well as the functioning of Australian society.

---

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

---

## 1 ALLOCATE FURTHER FUNDING TO RESEARCHING DRUG ADDICTIONS

Rather than taking an approach purely based on punishment and law and order, the Australian Government should undertake further research into the physiological causes of drug addictions. By undertaking such research, the Australian Government will have access to new information that can assist them in modifying their drug policy to reflect a health-led approach.

This research would revolve around the physiological-related causes of drug addiction, which can be aided by consulting with experts in the health fields. Examples of how this can be done include allocating further funding to the Department of Health to create a research taskforce, as well as constructing a Parliamentary committee in which health experts are called upon to offer advice for policy and legislation. The expertise utilised in this research could be that of WHO, who as previously mentioned, are able to assist countries in approaching drug addictions through a public health methodology, as well Australian healthcare practitioners and health scientists.

By utilising the expertise of these groups, the Australian Government will be able to construct drug policy that is guided by those dealing with drug issues on the frontlines, thus ensuring that the updated policy is relevant, reliable and evidence-based.

## **2 ALLOCATE FURTHER FUNDING TO PUBLIC HEALTH RESOURCES**

By allocating further funding to public health resources such as hospitals, rehabilitation clinics, medically supervised injecting rooms and psychologists, publicly funded health and treatment resources will become more widespread and accessible to those wanting assistance with drug use and addiction. In 2013, UnitingCare, when looking at the impact of their Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross, found that out of 14,410 users of the centre, 10,685 referrals to other services were accepted, with 5,019 of these referrals directed to drug treatment. [16] This shows the positive impacts publicly funded health resources can have on those with drug addictions. The desired outcome of this recommendation is to effectively treat the root causes of drug addictions, reduce or entirely eradicate the patient's drug addiction, and prevent possible future relapses and drug-related fatalities.

Not only would implementing this recommendation assist those seeking assistance, but it would also benefit the public health system itself. Further funding to public health resources would ensure that hospitals, rehabilitation clinics, psychiatrists and etc. are not stretched to their limits in terms of funding for things such as staff and programs in their endeavours to treat and prevent drug addictions.

## **3** **CONSIDER DECRIMINALISING ILLCIT DRUGS**

If the Australian Government decriminalises illicit drugs, the use and possession of these substances will still be illegal. What would change however is that criminal penalties for these crimes may instead be replaced with civil penalties. [17] The Australian Government can liaise with local health and criminal experts, as well as look to international governments to see how this can be successfully implemented in Australia, and has been successfully implemented internationally.

Rather than applying criminal penalties, such as large fines and possible jail-time, to those who possess drugs, consequences such as community service or rehabilitation can be delivered to offenders.

In terms of who would deliver these penalties, the Australian Government could create a panel of legal and health experts to do this, similarly to what is utilised in Portugal and described above. [18]

By receiving civil penalties for drug possession, offenders could have the opportunity to receive treatment and engage in activities that will enable them to improve their mental and physical wellbeing. These civil penalties may assist a person to retain a job and housing, as well as avoid being outcast by family and social groups. [19]

\

---

# CONCLUSION

---

By continuing the Howard-initiated tough and 'zero-tolerance' approach to drug possession and use, the current Australian Government may be less successful in increasing the amount of prevention and treatment of drug addictions in Australia as they would be if they addressed these issues from a public health approach.

With the number of Australians consuming illicit drugs on the rise, as well as the number of drug related arrests and deaths, it is clear that the actions of the Australian Government in their endeavour to reduce drug use in Australia must be reconsidered.

By utilising a public health style response to drug addictions, as has been done in many countries across the world, the Australian Government can assist in treating drug addictions at their root causes and could be more effective in their efforts to positively change the devastating statistics surrounding drug-related addictions and deaths in Australia.

## **Alyssa Collyvas**

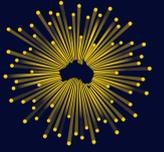
*Alyssa is completing her final unit of a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Politics and Policy Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies. Her interests include policy, particularly in regards to drugs, immigration and the environment, as well as social justice. Alyssa intends to continue to translate her passion for these interests into her career.*

# REFERENCES

- [1] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020) National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019: In brief, Australian Government, retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/77d8ea6e-f071-495c-b71e-3a632237269d/aihw-phe-270.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- [2] Rowe, J (2001) 'Pure Politics: A historical look at Australian drug policy', *Alternative Law Journal*, 26(3):125-129, doi:10.1177/1037969X0102600304.
- [3] Authority of the House of Representatives (2019) House of Representatives Questions Without Notice: Illicit Drugs, Parliament of Australia, retrieved from [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/6133541f-9c3b-4d52-a689-67b034ad1f12/0160/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/6133541f-9c3b-4d52-a689-67b034ad1f12/0160/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Australian Bureau of Statistics (27 September 2020), Drug induced deaths at highest rate since late 90s [media release], Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 23 December 2020, [https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2016~Media%20Release~Drug%20Induced%20Deaths%20Increase%20in%202016%20\(Media%20Release\)~9](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2016~Media%20Release~Drug%20Induced%20Deaths%20Increase%20in%202016%20(Media%20Release)~9)
- [6] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020) Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia, Australian Government, retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/priority-populations/people-in-contact-with-the-criminal-justice-system>
- [7] World Health Organisation (n.d) The World Health Organization: Expanding Public Health Approaches to the World Drug Problem, World Health Organisation, retrieved from [https://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/ungass-leaflet.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/ungass-leaflet.pdf?ua=1)
- [8] Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (2015) A Public Health and Rights Approach to Drugs, United Nations, retrieved from [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/JC2803\\_drugs\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/JC2803_drugs_en.pdf)
- [9] Hunt, E (2017) 'Former premiers and Australian police chiefs call for drug decriminalisation', *The Guardian*, 20 March, retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/mar/20/former-premiers-and-australian-police-chiefs-call-for-drug-decriminalisation>

# REFERENCES

- [10] Uniting (n.d) History of the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre: A story of harm minimisation, Uniting, retrieved from <<https://www.uniting.org/community-impact/uniting-medically-supervised-injecting-centre--msic/history-of-uniting-msic#:~:text=The%20first%20'official'%20supervised%20injecting,Cross%2C%20Sydney%20since%20May%202001>>
- [11] CBC News (19 April 2020) 'How Portugal Successfully Tackled Its Drug Crisis' [video], CBC News: The National, YouTube, accessed 20 January 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQJ7n-JpcCk>>
- [12] Vice News (30 Jan 2018) 'This is Norway's Plan to Decriminalise Drugs (HBO)' [video], Vice News, YouTube, accessed 20 January 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YveacJ4aDN8>>
- [13] National Institute on Drug Abuse (2018) Understanding Drug Use and Addiction DrugFacts, National Institute on Drug Abuse, retrieved <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/understanding-drug-use-addiction>>
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Khoury, L et al. (2010) 'Substance use, childhood traumatic experience, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in an urban civilian population', *Depression & Anxiety* (1091-4269), 27(12), pp. 1077-1086. Doi: 10.1002/da.20751
- [16] UnitingCare (2014), Cross Currents, UnitingCare, retrieved <<https://www.uniting.org/content/dam/uniting/documents/community-impact/uniting-msic/MSIC-Cross-Currents.pdf>>
- [17] Alcohol and Drug Foundation (n.d) Overview: Decriminalisation vs legalisation, Alcohol and Drug Foundation, retrieved from <<https://adf.org.au/talking-about-drugs/law/decriminalisation/overview-decriminalisation-legalisation/#:~:text=The%20key%20difference%20to%20a,to%20possess%20and%20use%20drugs>>
- [18] CBC News (19 April 2020) 'How Portugal Successfully Tackled Its Drug Crisis' [video], CBC News: The National, YouTube, accessed 20 January 2020.
- [19] Alcohol and Drug Foundation (n.d) Overview: Decriminalisation vs legalisation, Alcohol and Drug Foundation, retrieved from <<https://adf.org.au/talking-about-drugs/law/decriminalisation/overview-decriminalisation-legalisation/#:~:text=The%20key%20difference%20to%20a,to%20possess%20and%20use%20drugs>>



---

© **YOUNG AUSTRALIANS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

[POLICY@YOUNGAUSINT.ORG.AU](mailto:POLICY@YOUNGAUSINT.ORG.AU)