

Evaluating the South Australian Police Drug Diversion Initiative – a 22-year analysis of trends, offender profiles and re-diversion rates

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Introduction: Australia has been at the forefront of introducing police drug diversion programs as an alternative to the criminal punishment of drug possession. But more research to inform best practice approaches is required. This study aims to analyse trends and changes in the profile and re-diversion rates of participants in one of the longest standing Australian diversion programs - the South Australian Police Drug Diversion Initiative (SA PDDI), including changes pre and post a cap of only 2 diversions in a 4-year period.

Method: This study analyses 22 years (2001 to 2023) of previously inaccessible SA State Government data on everyone diverted through the SA PDDI. Trends and changes in the profile and rates of re-diversion of participants are examined, including differences based on gender, cultural background, compliance, or drug type.

Results: The analysis showed increases in diversion rates between 2001 and 2018, preceding the introduction of a diversion cap. Most people diverted were male and detected in possession of methamphetamine and/or an ice pipe. Most people complied with their health assessment and 58% were only diverted once. Profiles of those diverted more often will be discussed. Of note, women and Indigenous people were significantly more likely to have ever been re-diverted as were those who did not complete a health assessment.

Implications: This analysis shows that the rate of diversion through the SA PDDI grew from program commencement until 2018 and that overall, the SA PDDI is likely to be achieving many of its' intended objectives such as lessening burden on the court for use and possession offences and increasing early interventions and take up of education, assessment and treatment. But the evaluation also indicates that the introduction of the cap may be affecting the capacity to achieve these goals. Avenues to improve policy and practice will be discussed.

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