Who speaks for whom: understanding the representational claims made at the 2024 NSW Drug Summit

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Acknowledgements and conflicts

This research was conducted on the lands of the Bidjigal and Gadigal people. First Nations sovereignty was never ceded and the impacts of colonialism are ongoing.

We thank the participants involved in this research for contributing their time, experiences, and reflections on what was a difficult government process, and at a difficult time of year.

Conflict declaration: members of the research team participated at the summit (plenaries, participants, observers).

Overview

Central to processes of policy engagement is who gets represented and how.

2024 NSW Drug Summit
- Four days in 2024
- brought together a range of stakeholders including **'medical experts, police, people with lived and living experience, drug user organisations, families, and other stakeholders'** (NSW Government, 2024) to attempt to build consensus on approaches to drug use and harm.

Our Aim: to analyse how different group perspectives were represented at the Summit and with what effects.

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Three sites of representation at the Summit

Attendee participation at the summit days

'Have Your Say' Survey Platform

Summit documents (transcripts, briefing papers, report, media releases, gov response)

Data are sentiment interviews (n=16, average 23 minutes) conducted in Dec 2024

The study is ongoing (further data collection in progress, Sept 2025 - ongoing).

Invitations

"**very little clarity** ...who was gonna be invited ...." (SI 2)

"I don't know where my original invitation came from. ... **all very strange**" (SI 14)

"I had to advocate for my spot ... it **wasn't transparent who was invited and why.**" (SI 3)

"It was all very last minute ... **really unclear**" (SI 8)

How did individuals navigate representation?

Organisation

"I think I was representing [org]... Yes, definitely." (SI 6)

Parts of 'the sector'

"Representing the non-government sector" (SI 16)

"representative of residential services" (SI 3)

Self

"primarily I was representing myself as a person with lived experience" (SI 1)

"I was representing myself." (SI 13)

Perspective

"I guess I was representing a research perspective ..., but I wasn't representing an organisation." (SI 13)

"a regional perspective. (SI 14)

General group representation

"**was great to see** so many people from a range of different, different types of groups." (SI 10)

"There **wasn't a diversity** of participation that represented the **community in general.**" (SI 11)
"a lot of people that should have had a seat at the table, **didn't really have a seat at the table.**" (SI 15)

Aboriginal representation

"not fair or reasonable or thoughtful, or considerate or respectful" (SI 10)

"**shocking**" (SI 14)

"**glaring omission** of not including First Nations people as part of the opening plenary. I think kind of **set a negative tone** …." (SI 16)

"**atrocious**" (SI 8)

"**it was misguided not to have Aboriginal representation in the planning and in the leadership of it.**" (SI 3)

Partial perspectives

Too many academics:
"just so much research, it wasn't diverse" (SI 3); "too much academics on day one." (SI 4)

One Aboriginal speaker only; one narrative; bad timing:
"was an amazing personal story. But I thought the tone, and the framing was terrible … a classic story of redemption." (SI 4)
"it had the effect of giving the sense Aboriginal people can contribute their experience of addiction" in one way (SI 10)

"it was also <u>after</u> the priority like after everyone had done the working groups, so it didn't really influence the priorities that were set." (SI 3)

Representing balance AND imbalance:
"even if they wanted to go with that, that Chappie from from America, why didn't they have someone from Portugal? Why didn't they balance the scale, so to speak" (SI 1)

"when … we saw the, the Mayor of Portland was going to be up and that's fine. I thought, 'OK, they're trying to get some sort of balance'" (SI 12)

Space should be made in the planning, structure and processes of summits for variable social perspectives in each group to '*pluralize* group representation' (Young, 2000, p148).

"Would anyone have been surprised that First Nations people, LGBTQIA, young people, culturally diverse people were unhappy? Of course not. I mean, **if you don't understand the complexity of drug policy and the complexity of the constituents to drug policy. You're gonna get what you got**." (SI 13)

Thank you

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