

## **Analysis of public opinion on decriminalisation and legalisation of illicit drugs in the Australian population: What does this mean for drug policy reform?**

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**Introduction:** In response to increasing harms from a toxic, unregulated drug supply, some countries have called for decriminalisation or legalisation of illicit drugs. However, the variability of decriminalisation models can make public understanding difficult. Given that drug policy reform depends on public support, this study aims to explore Australian attitudes towards decriminalisation and legalisation of illicit drugs, and the consistency of views across different policy-related questions.

**Methods:** We analysed data from the 2022/23 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) on attitudes towards:

1. Responses to personal possession of cannabis, ecstasy, heroin, and methamphetamine (no action, warning, health response, civil sanctions, criminal sanctions);
2. Legalisation of these drugs for personal use;
3. Increased penalties for their sale; and
4. Whether cannabis use should be a criminal offence.

**Results:** Most Australians (80.1%) believed cannabis use should not be a criminal offence; 44.6% supported legalisation. Support for legalising other drugs was lower (ecstasy: 12%; heroin and methamphetamine: 6%). For cannabis possession, 33.5% supported no action, 21.9% a warning, and 21.9% a health response. A health response was the most common preference for possession of ecstasy (37.9%), heroin (53.5%), and methamphetamine (51.5%). Even among those opposing legalisation, many supported a health response for these drugs possession: cannabis (35.7%), ecstasy (38.6%), heroin (50%), methamphetamine (47.8%). Those supporting increased penalties for drug sales also endorsed health responses for possession: cannabis (35.6%), ecstasy (42.6%), heroin (52.9%), methamphetamine (51.1%).

**Discussions and Conclusions:** While support for legalisation of drugs is low, Australians largely favour a health-based response over criminal sanctions. Australians' have nuanced views on illicit drug use, engaging the public early in policy reform conversations is crucial for garnering public support; policy reform is difficult without public support.

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