

Looking Beyond the Headlines: Ambulance Trends After Drug Decriminalisation

Ryan Baldwin^{1,2}, **Joseph Walshe**³, **Harry M. X. Lai**^{4,5}, **Dan I. Lubman**^{1,2} & **Rowan P. Ogeil**^{1,2}.

¹ Eastern Health Clinical School and Monash Addiction Research Centre, Monash University, Box Hill, Australia, ² Turning Point, Eastern Health, Richmond, Australia, ³ ACT Emergency Services Agency, Majura, ACT, Australia. ⁴ Health Data Intelligence, New South Wales Ambulance, State Operations Centre, Sydney, NSW, Australia, ⁵ Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Disclosure of Interest

No interests to declare

Background

- Building on the decriminalization of cannabis in 2020, the ACT decriminalised personal possession of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, ecstasy, LSD and psilocybine
- Reforms aim to treat substance use as a health issue, not criminal issue
- Vocal opponents warned reforms would lead to increase in overdoses, “drug tourism”, and rising harm

Aim

- Provide preliminary evidence around changes to acute drug-related harms
- Examined whether trends in drug-related ambulance attendances changed post decimalization reforms

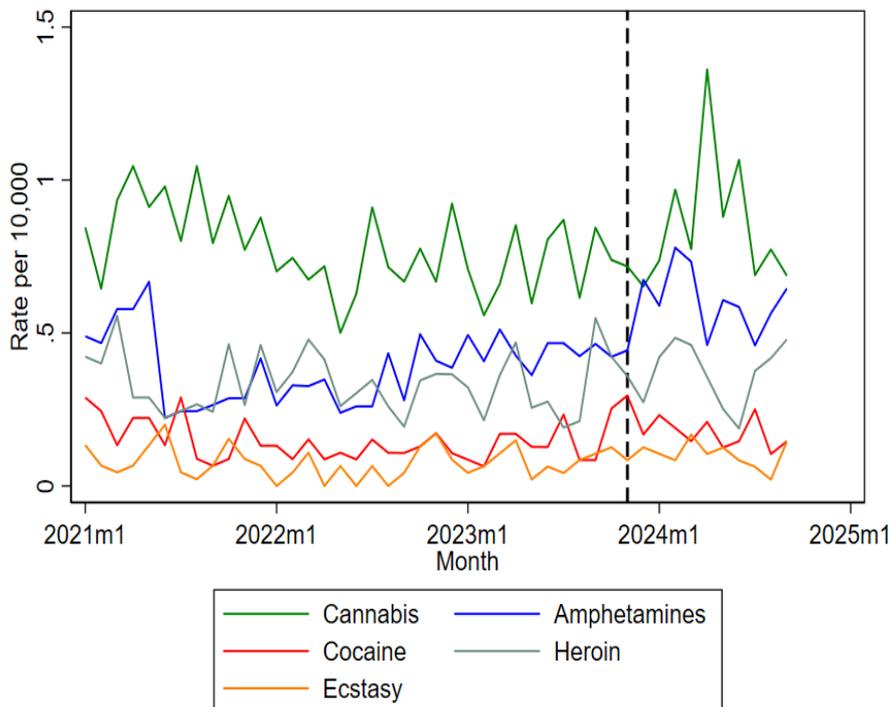


Data and Method

- Data from National Ambulance Surveillance System (Jan 2021 – Sept 2024)
- Interrupted time series used to assess changes in rates of ambulance attendances involving:
 - Cannabis
 - Amphetamines
 - Cocaine
 - Heroin
 - Ecstasy
 - Overdose related attendances
 - Patients from out of state
 - Police co-attendance
- New South Wales ambulance attendances used a quasi-control

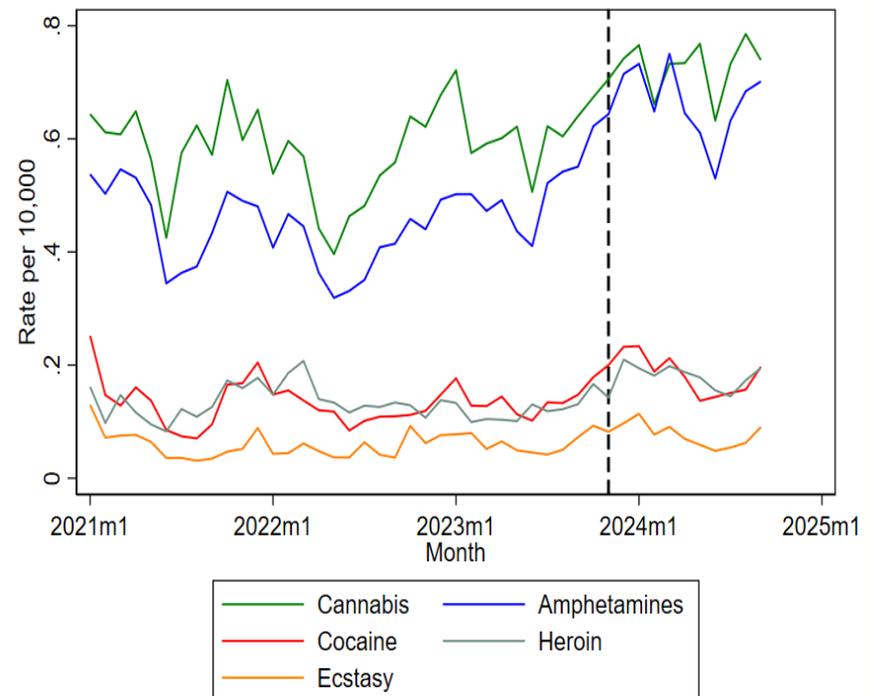
ACT

- No significant post-reform change in drug-related attendances
- Small step (immediate) increases in cocaine ($\beta = .10$) & amphetamine ($\beta = .16$) related attendances

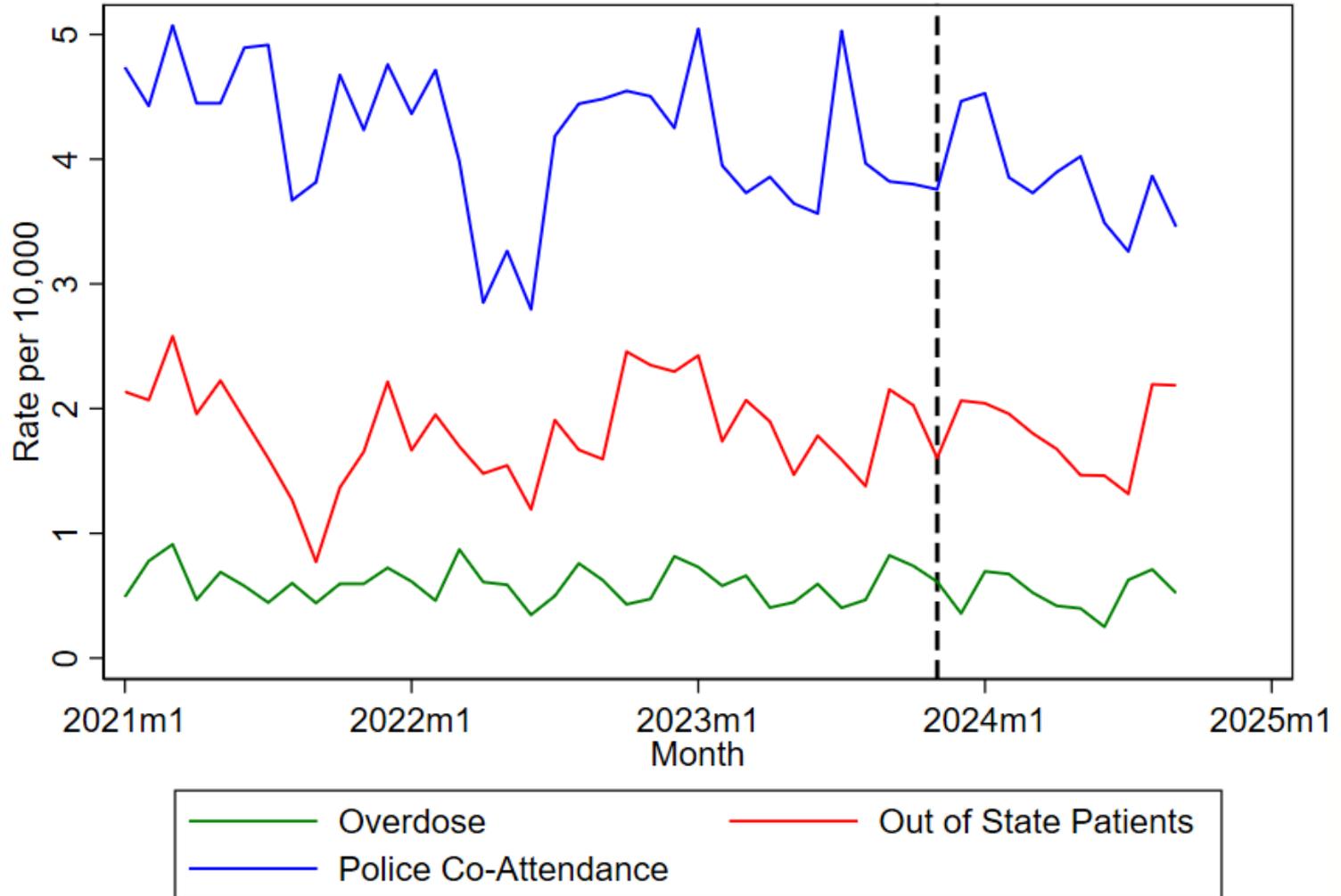


NSW

- Significant post-reform increase in cannabis-related attendances ($\beta = .01$)
- Small step (immediate) increases in cocaine ($\beta = .05$), cannabis ($\beta = .08$), amphetamine ($\beta = .17$) & heroin ($\beta = .04$) related attendances



Result



Conclusion

- No clear evidence the decriminalisation reforms impacted substance-related ambulance attendances across the ACT
- Further triangulation needed across health and police data
- Need for qualitative research to assess changes in help-seeking and stigma



Thank you

Dr Ryan Baldwin,

Research Fellow, Eastern
Health Clinical School,
Monash University and
Turning Point

ryan.baldwin@monash.edu

