

Analysis of public opinion on decriminalisation and legalisation of illicit drugs in the Australian population

Zachary Lloyd¹, Amanda Roxburgh^{1,2}

¹Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia. ²National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney

BACKGROUND

51%

Increase in drug-related offences between 2011/2012 and 2020/2021¹

\$1.1 BILLION

Cost of drug-related offences to State and Federal Government in 2020/2021¹

65%

Of cases related to personal possession or use (2022/23)¹

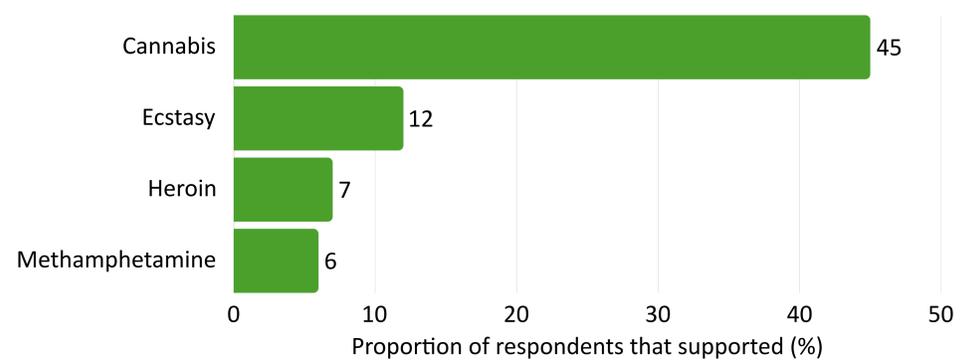


Figure 1. Support for legalisation of illicit drugs for personal use

AIMS

1. Explore attitudes towards legalisation of illicit drugs for personal use
2. Describe preferences for responses when people are found in possession of illicit drugs for personal use
3. Examine legalisation attitudes cross-tabulated with preferences for responses to possession of illicit drugs for personal use

METHODS

Study design

- Exploratory, secondary data analysis
- National Drug Strategy Household Survey (2022/23)²
 - Design: Complex, random, multi-stage stratified
 - N=21,663

Statistical analysis

- Complete case analysis
- Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations - weighted percentages and 95% CIs

Outcome measures

- Responses for possession of illicit drugs (cannabis, ecstasy, methamphetamine, heroin) for personal use (no action, warning only, health, civil sanctions, criminal sanctions)
- Legalisation of these drugs for personal use

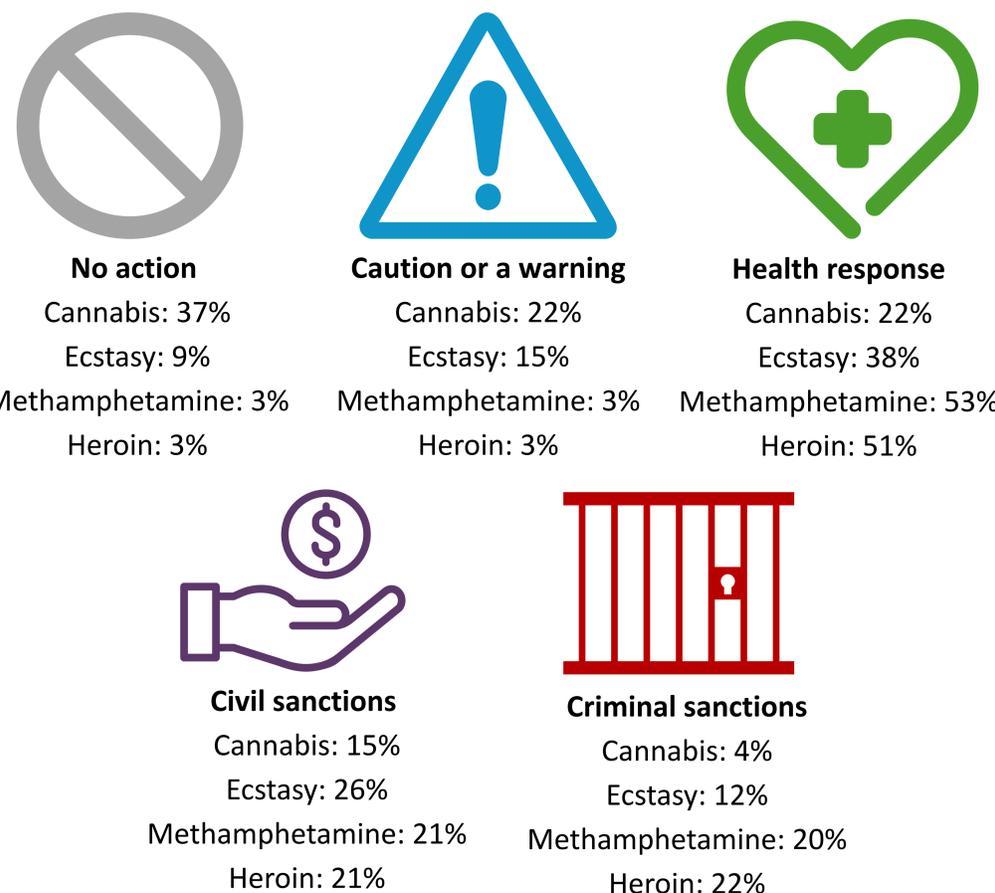


Figure 2. Preferences for responses for possession of illicit drugs for personal use

RESULTS

- Australians were largely supportive of the legalisation of cannabis for personal use (Figure 1)
- Support for legalisation of other drugs was lower (Figure 1)
- Australians largely supported a health response to possession of illicit drugs across all four drug types (Figure 2)
- Smaller proportions endorsed civil and criminal sanctions for personal use of methamphetamine and heroin (Figure 2)
- Even those Australians who opposed legalisation supported a health response (Figure 3)

CONCLUSIONS

- Support for legalisation of illicit drugs for personal use was low (with the exception of cannabis), but Australians still preferred a health response over criminal sanctions
- There was support for a health response even among those who opposed legalisation
- Funding misaligned with public opinion on responses to personal use of illicit drugs. Most goes to law enforcement, less to health and harm reduction responses³

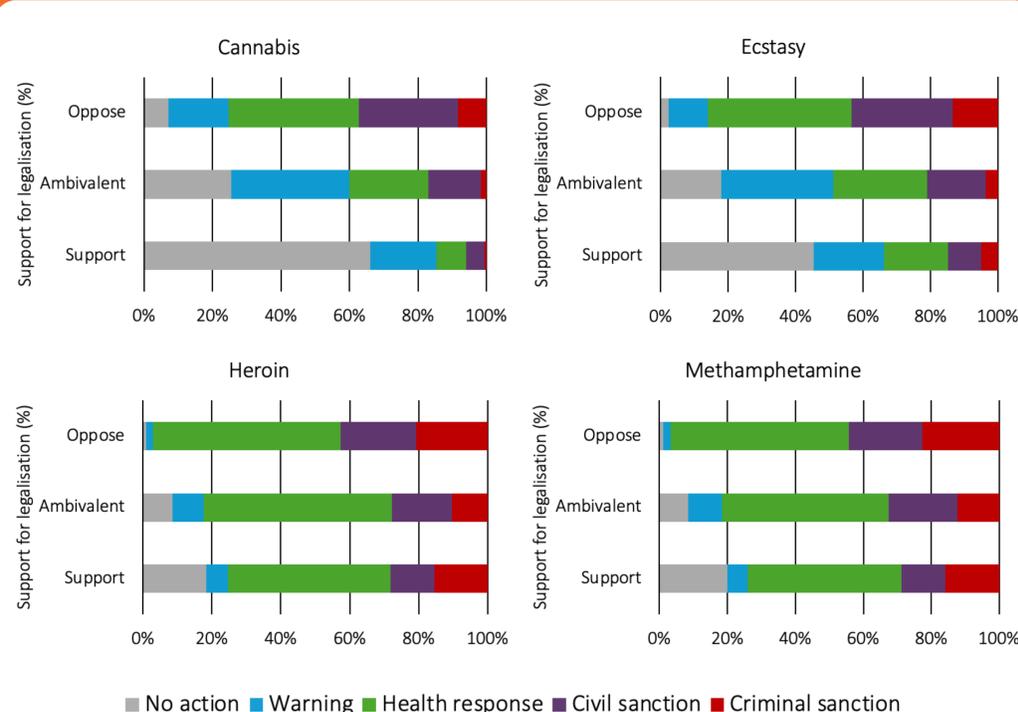


Figure 3. Preferences for responses for illicit drugs possession for personal use by support for legalisation

References

1. Australian Institute of Health Welfare. Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia [Internet]. Canberra: AIHW; 2025 [cited 2025 29 Oct]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia>. 2. Australian Institute of Health Welfare. National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022–2023 [Internet]. Canberra: AIHW; 2025 [cited 2025 29 Oct]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/illicit-use-of-drugs/national-drug-strategy-household-survey>. 3. Ritter A, Greal M, Kelaita P, Kowalski M. The Australian 'drug budget': Government policy expenditure 2021/2022. DPMP Monograph No 36. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW; 2024. <https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/30075>.