

Minor drug offences, major missed opportunities: The experiences of Victorians detected for minor drug offences

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Introduction: Criminal responses to 'minor drug offences' can have negative impacts, including stigma and delayed access to services. There is growing interest globally in alternatives to criminalisation. In Victoria, a 2018 Parliamentary Inquiry was supportive of treating minor drug offences as a health, rather than criminal justice issue, recommending pathways for prompt referral to health services following detection. The aim of this presentation is to analyse the experiences and impacts of Victorian adults detected for a minor drug offence, and how the criminal responses intersected with participants' health and social needs.

Methods: Ninety-five adults participated in semi-structured interviews, and 12 participants completed online surveys. Data were analysed inductively using framework analysis techniques to identify themes.

Results: Three central themes of participants' experiences of detection for minor drug offences were identified: (1) detection as exacerbating stigma and unmet needs; (2) detection as a missed opportunity to attend to unmet needs; and, (3) future health and social responses to minor drug offences. Participants reported ongoing impacts across the lifespan in areas of health, work, finances, and relationships. Participants recommended a number of practical approaches to assist others at the time of detection.

Discussions and Conclusions: A range of deleterious effects (and missed opportunities for referrals) were noted. Health services, drug services and diversion programs exist, but were not identified or routinely offered. Findings suggest the current piecemeal, limited, and often harmful response to minor drug offences can amplify (or lead to) people feeling undeserving of support. The presentation concludes by reflecting on the potential for reforms to meaningfully create opportunities for health and social responses.

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