

Exploring public perceptions on drug policy using deliberative workshops

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Introduction: *New Zealand's (NZ) drug policy has largely retained a criminal justice focus for over 50 years, despite multiple reviews recommending substantive change, and public support for a health-based approach. Deliberative democracy, including mechanisms such as citizens assemblies, citizens juries, or deliberative workshops, have been identified as a potential mechanism to overcome some of the inertia within drug policy. This project aimed to 1) engage with a group of citizens to try to develop a group consensus on how best to respond to drugs in NZ, and 2) explore how community members' diverse views were affected by deliberation, and 3) describe participant experiences of a deliberative workshop process.*

Methods: *Seven deliberative workshops were held with a group of ten retirees from Christchurch NZ. Participants were asked to engage in group discussions that may (or may not) lead to a group consensus. Workshops included discussions with expert guest speakers, reading and discussion of journal articles and reports. The final session was a debrief, the purpose of which was to understand what influenced participants' views, and their experiences of the deliberative workshop process.*

Key Findings: *The group produced a consensus statement and set of recommendations for politicians and policymakers, which emphasised a health-based approach to drugs. The value of dialogue, mutual learning, and deliberation to achieve change arose from analysis of the debrief. Participants reported experiencing the process positively and gained personal satisfaction from taking part.*

Discussions and Conclusions: *This study highlights the potential value of deliberative democracy and demonstrates that a group of 'lay' citizens can reach nuanced, thoughtful, and practical solutions for drug policy, and experience this process positively.*

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: *This project provides learnings for potential larger scale deliberative democratic exercises, and presents a mechanism for meaningful engagement with communities.*

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