

THE ROLE OF POLICE IN PREVENTING AND MINIMISING ILLICIT DRUG USE AND ITS HARMS.

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Spoooner, McPherson & Hall (2004).

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

Methodology

The researchers undertook this project by means of a literature review, consultations with police agencies and other relevant organisations, documentation and review of strategies and programs, and consultations with representatives from the health sector and illicit drug user groups. The project sought to enhance the understanding of police as to how they could support the National Drug Strategy in four specific areas. These were: preventing and minimising the impact of drug overdoses; encouraging safer illicit drug use practices; encouraging entry into treatment programs; and, reducing the demand for illicit drugs (including those strategies aimed at reducing the uptake of illicit drugs).

Key findings:

- Harm minimisation has formed the basis of Australia's National Drug Strategy since 1985 and it encompasses a wide range of approaches including: supply reduction strategies; demand reduction strategies; and, harm reduction strategies.
- Police organisations have endorsed the national approach to harm minimisation at their most senior level.
- Police encounter a wide range of illicit drug-related harms and problems, including: fatal and non-fatal overdoses; crime problems such as drug trafficking, property and violent crime; family violence; drug driving; child abuse and neglect; drug facilitated sexual assault; public intoxication; drug dealing; and, discarded drug-using equipment in public places.
- In considering the reduction of harm, it is important to consider the concept of net harm, using a number of different dimensions. These are: the categories of harm (be they health, social, economic, safety, public order or crime); the recipients of harm (drug users, families or friends of drug users, the local community, or society); the sources of harm (direct - from drug use, or induced - from our efforts to control, regulate or reduce the use of a drug); and, the timeframes (short, medium and long term). This is important because strategies that seek to reduce drug harm in one dimension can increase harm in another dimension. Therefore, in planning policing strategies it is important to consider how they might impact on overall net drug harm, taking into account the possible impact of the strategies in each of these dimensions.
- There are a number of ways in which police contribute to reducing illicit drug-related harm. These can include: non attendance or the use of discretion in attending non-fatal overdoses; not policing near harm reduction services such as needle and syringe supply programs and methadone programs; supporting harm reduction services; informing drug users about dangerous batches of drugs; evidence-based community drug education; and,

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managing drug-affected people.

- There are a number of ways in which police can contribute to reducing the demand for illicit drugs. These include encouraging the entry of drug users into treatment and utilising drug diversion schemes.
- Police can also become involved in community-based activities that reduce drug demand and harms. Some examples include: community-building programs such as crime-prevention committees, Drug Action Teams and local sport and recreation programs; youth development programs; and, by effectively managing youth in public places.
- School-based drug education provides another opportunity for police to contribute to demand reduction and harm reduction, but it is important that these activities be consistent with the evidence on effective strategies in this area.
- It is important that illicit drug supply reduction strategies are focussed towards harm minimisation and fully evaluated.
- The researchers identified a number of influences on police in so far as their ability to prevent illicit drug use and minimise its harms are concerned. These include: the trends and models that guide policing practice; the policing workforce itself (including the attitudes of police towards, and communication with, the health sector, drug users, and harm reduction in general); and the systems used by police (including planning methods and strategic approaches, performance indicators, evaluation methods, education and training, the use of discretion, and the police infrastructure for local problem-solving); and, community and political influences.

Implications for police

As is evident, police already carry out a range of activities that minimise illicit drug use and its harms. Indeed, there is a lot of commonality between the kinds of strategies that represent good practice in policing generally and those which successfully reduce drug-related harms.

As the authors pointed out, the measures that police use to reduce drug-related harm are not well documented or evaluated. There is also a lack of research concerning the particular elements of policing activities that have the most impacts on illicit drug use and harm. The researchers therefore made a series of recommendations to improve this. They recommended that:

- audits of current activity be conducted, and compared with research evidence concerning effective strategies, to identify strengths and areas of need;
- evaluations of promising approaches be conducted and disseminated;
- police participate as co-investigators to increase the likelihood of research and evaluation activity being relevant to, and accepted by, police;
- dedicated funding be made available for monitoring, research, evaluation and dissemination of police practice on harm minimisation;
- future harm minimisation projects be required to include strategies for ongoing evaluation throughout the life of the project in order to be considered for funding approval;
- research be conducted into how police can better deal with the needs of high-risk population groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, youth, users with a dual diagnosis, and rural communities; and,
- dedicated funding be made available to plan and to implement a five-year multifaceted workforce-development plan to develop and implement the recommendations of this project.

A full copy of this report is available on the NDLERF website at www.ndlerf.gov.au

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