

# Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

*committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use*

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8 February, 2006

**MEDIA RELEASE**

## **Young and mentally ill endangered by Howard's cannabis scare**

When COAG meets on Friday Prime Minister Howard plans to urge the Premiers and Chief Ministers to adopt draconian laws on cannabis as a means of tackling mental health problems. Although claimed to be aimed at drug dealers these laws will effectively widen the net to catch and prosecute young occasional users and the mentally ill.

“Parents who care about their children should be extremely alarmed at this most recent call by the Prime Minister to increase penalties for cannabis,” said Brian McConnell, President of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform. “Already 78% of our prisoners have a mental disorder and 65% have a substance abuse disorder. Sending people to prison does not address either cannabis use or mental illness.”

Recent surveys of certain groups show that the use of “ice” (crystalline methamphetamine) had risen from 35% in 1999 to 52% in 2004 (Illicit Drug Reporting System) and that ecstasy users had risen to 45% in 2004 (National Party Drugs Initiative). At the same time cannabis use by the Australian population has, since 1998, fallen by 37% down to 11.3% in 2004. Prime Minister Howard plans to toughen laws for a drug whose use and popularity is declining.

“The Federal Government is dealing with yesterday’s problem and plans to use ‘*Reefer Madness*’ type tactics to frighten states into adopting draconian laws and penalties that will not address the problem of mental illness nor cannabis use but will simply continue to line the pockets of criminals and corrupt officials. Furthermore tougher laws introduce a “thrill” factor that may well attract young people back to this declining black market.”

Despite the differences between State and Territory laws, use of cannabis is statistically the same in each jurisdiction. Research studies have shown that the toughness or otherwise of the laws does not deter its use.

“The evidence does not support the Federal Government’s proposal and state and territory leaders should be very wary.”

“Instead of dealing with the complex problem of mental illness as a health and social issue Prime Minister Howard plans to use the criminal justice system and put more of our mentally ill in jail. Subjecting young, healthy occasional cannabis users to the stresses and abuse brought about by the criminal justice system for a victimless crime has serious consequences to their health and future life chances, but it would be many times worse for people with a mental illness.”

“No parent would want his or her child to be subjected to such treatment. Police prosecution and prison is a greater risk for mental illness. Criminalising children is not protecting them,” concluded Brian McConnell.

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**For more information: Contact Brian McConnell (02) 6254 2961 or mobile 04 0907 4033**

*Footnote: “Reefer Madness” was a short film made by the USA government in the 1930s. Its aim was to deter cannabis use and made an exaggerated claim that smoking cannabis would turn the user into a homicidal maniac. The film in more recent times has had a cult following and has been a source of ridicule because of its over-the-top unrealistic treatment of cannabis use.*