

EMBARGOED: 0001hrs Monday 26 March 2018

Health and social services national summit: Joint Statement on harms from current Australian drug laws

This Joint Statement is issued on Monday 26 March 2018 by health and social service providers and policy leaders who met for a national summit on drug harm reduction at Victoria's Parliament House on Wednesday 21 March 2018, convened by [Australia21: think tank for the public good](#).

We the undersigned call on Australia's federal, state and territory governments to treat drug use primarily as a health and social issue and to remove criminal sanctions for personal use and possession.

We make this call because our own professional experience supports overwhelming evidence that current Australian drug laws, although well-intentioned, create and/or worsen a wide range of health and social harms. There are complex two-way interactions between the punitive approach to drug use and problems including poverty, social disadvantage, unemployment, homelessness, family violence, child protection interventions, mental illness and suicide. Poor drug policy also leads to further crime. The human and financial costs of the negative impacts of the current drug laws are borne not just by drug users, but by their families and communities, and the nation as a whole.

We have agreed to work together to improve public awareness of (a) the negative impacts of the current drug laws and the way they are interpreted and implemented, and (b) the real and tangible health and social benefits of drug law reform.

Signed,

Laurence Alvis

EO, Uniting ReGen (AOD treatment and education service of Uniting Vic Tas)

Kat Armstrong

Lawyer, former drug user

Co-founder, Women In Prison Advocacy Network (now Women's Justice Network)

Paul Barratt AO

Chair, Australia21: think tank for the public good

Former Secretary, Departments of Primary Industries and Energy & Defence

Liz Barrett

Campaigns and Policy Advisor, Uniting Centre for Research, Innovation & Advocacy

Social justice advocate

Rebecca Bunn

Director and Community Engagement Manager, Australia21

Managing Director, Imprisonment Observatory, Monash University

Bill Bush

President, Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

Former head of the Treaties Section in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Kasy Chambers

CEO, Anglicare Australia

Kyle Cox

*Campaign and Advocacy Advisor, Uniting
Former senior staff member, US Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health*

Emeritus Professor Bob Douglas AO

*Founding Director, Australia21
Foundation Director, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, ANU*

Professor Suzanne Fraser

Program Leader, National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University

Professor Margaret Hamilton AO

*Former: Foundation Director, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre; executive member of the
Australian National Council on Drugs; chair of the Capital City Lord Mayors Drug Advisory Committee*

Susan Helyar

Director, ACT Council of Social Services

Caitlin Hughes

*Criminologist
Senior Research Fellow, Drug Policy Modelling Program, University of NSW*

Marianne Jauncey

*Medical Director, Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre
Conjoint Senior Lecturer, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of NSW
Clinical Senior Lecturer, University of Sydney*

Marion McConnell OAM

Founding member, Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

Stephen McNally

Deputy CEO, Pennington Institute: substance use research and practical action

Emeritus Professor Jake Najman

*Sociologist
Director, Queensland Alcohol and Drug Research and Education Center, University of Queensland*

Matt Noffs

*CEO, Noffs Foundation (Australia's largest drug and alcohol treatment service provider for young
people under 25)
Co-founder of Street Universities*

Carol Nikakis

CEO, Victorian Association for the Care & Resettlement of Offenders

Margaret Nimac

Representing the CEO of Uniting, Peter Worland

Professor Peter Norden AO

*Fellow, Australian & New Zealand Society of Criminology.
Hon. Fellow, Humanities & Social Sciences, Deakin University*

Jon O'Brien

*Head of Social Justice Forum, Uniting (the Uniting Church's community service and advocacy arm in
NSW/ACT)*

Connor Palmer

*Representing YoungA21, Australia21's youth advisory committee
Pharmacy intern*

Mick Palmer AO APM

Emeritus Director, Australia21

Former Australian Federal Police Commissioner

Former Commissioner of the Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Service

Fiona Patten

Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly

Founder and leader of REASON, a movement of radical common sense

Emeritus Professor David Penington AC

Former Dean of Medicine and Vice Chancellor, University of Melbourne

Former chair of the Victorian Premier's Drug Advisory Council, Capital City Lord Mayors Drug

Advisory Committee & Victorian Drug Expert Committee

Deborah Rice

Director and Communications Manager, Australia21

Former ABC News Senior Reporter and Presenter

Professor Robin Room

Sociologist

Professor, Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Latrobe University

Associate Professor Kate Seear

Associate Professor in Law, Monash University

Academic Director of the Springvale Monash Legal Service

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Alex Wodak AM

Director, Australia21

President, Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation

Emeritus Consultant, Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital Sydney

Background

Participants at Australia21's Roundtable on the social impacts of Australia's drug laws addressed the evidence that a prohibition and law enforcement approach is not reducing illegal drug use, but is instead causing many adverse outcomes across our communities.

"Arrest and prosecution often involves the loss of employment, housing and family and community support. This can spiral into further crime, but also increase family homelessness, domestic violence, child protection interventions, mental health issues and suicide rates," said the Roundtable convenor, [Emeritus Professor Bob Douglas](#), a leading epidemiologist and founding Director of [Australia21](#).

"Meanwhile, prohibition and the threat of criminal penalties drives drug users away from the help they need and puts the production, distribution and control of illicit drugs into the hands of criminals," said Em. Professor Douglas.

Health and social service providers have been witnessing a rise in the human and financial costs of the current policies for individuals, families and the nation as a whole, according to Laurence Alvis, who leads alcohol and other drug services in Melbourne for Uniting Vic Tas.

"There is no question that Australia's drug policy settings create and worsen social problems beyond the drugs field. Uniting regularly deals with people experiencing multiple social issues in our alcohol and other drug programs. Our experience is that drug policy can also have a negative impact on their experiences of issues such as mental health, family violence and homelessness."

There was concern among the Roundtable participants that the current policy of allocating 60% of Australian government drug budgets to policing and prisons has failed to produce improvements, especially as highly effective treatment and harm reduction strategies have been chronically underfunded.

"By prioritising treatment, we could reduce the negative impact of focusing on criminalisation rather than harm reduction. We see the failure of the current approach in the length of waiting lists for services like ours. It means that service funders focus on short episodes of treatment, when we know that treatment over a longer term is more likely to produce lasting outcomes," said Mr Alvis.

The extent to which adverse social conditions and disadvantage actually increase problematic drug use also needs far more research in Australia.

"It is clear the prevalence and seriousness of a wide scope of social problems in diverse sectors would be reduced through better responses to the use and abuse of illegal, pharmaceutical and other drugs, including alcohol and tobacco," said former Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Palmer, an Emeritus Director of Australia21.

"The War on Drugs approach was well intended but failed disastrously in Australia and other countries. While unregulated manufacture and trafficking should remain serious criminal offences, Australia should adopt a more rational, more cost-effective, evidence-based and human rights approach, including decriminalisation of personal possession of drugs and better treatment options. We can't punish people into getting better."

The national Roundtable was held in Victoria's Parliament House, where the state's report on the Parliamentary Drug Law Reform Inquiry is due to be delivered on Tuesday 27 March. The participants hope to see recommendations that lead to better support for drug harm reduction.

For more information: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ghpjr34k0p0dn0u/AABHxEfNLUhN5BiDtYIH5KD4a?dl=0>

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