

MEDIA RELEASE

4 June 2024



EMBARGOED UNTIL 02:00AM TUESDAY 04 JUNE 2024

New Report Exposes Chronic Under-funding of Life Saving Harm Reduction Services

Despite recent data showing that illicit drug use is increasing in Australia, government investment in programs and services aimed at reducing drug-related harm is at an all-time low, a new UNSW, Sydney report shows.

[The Australian 'drug budget': Government drug policy expenditure 2021/22](#) report released today by the Drug Policy Modelling Program (DPMP) at UNSW shows that of the \$5.45 billion of proactive government expenditure on illicit drugs in the 2021/2022 financial year, less than 1.6% or (\$90 million) was spent on harm reduction responses. By contrast, the report also shows that almost 65% (or \$3.5 billion) was spent on law enforcement, with most of that being used to fund routine (street level) policing against drugs.

[Harm Reduction Australia \(HRA\)](#) Executive Director, Dr Annie Madden AO said *"this first report in the 'drug budget' series in over a decade exposes the 'clay feet' of Australian drug policy. For decades Australian governments have sold the lie that Australia's National Drug Strategy is based on a balanced approach to addressing illicit drug use across supply, demand and harm reduction approaches. This much needed new data report conclusively shows, however, that Australia's approach to drug policy is anything but balanced."*

HRA has welcomed the new report which it says reflects the actual state of play and therefore represents an important contribution towards greater transparency and accountability in relation to government expenditure on illicit drugs. The report shows that despite a very modest increase in expenditure in the drug treatment domain since the last report in 2009/2010, federal and state government investment in harm reduction has continued to decline from a very low 2.2% in 2009/2010 to an even lower 1.6% in 2021/2022.

"We already knew government expenditure on harm reduction was unacceptably low, but even we were shocked to learn that spending on harm reduction has declined even further over the past decade. The fact is that, of all the domains, it is harm reduction, that has the strongest evidence base to support, not just its effectiveness and impact as a frontline response to illicit drug use, but its cost-effectiveness as well" Dr Madden stated.

"Harm reduction initiatives such as needles and syringe programs, take home naloxone, drug consumption rooms, and pill testing services, are proven to reduce harms and save lives. Yet, we continue to see billions of dollars of public funds going to ineffective and harmful criminal justice responses over evidence-based harm reduction approaches" concluded Dr Madden.

The most recent [Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) confirms the Australian community increasingly wants governments to move away from criminalising and punitive responses in favour of more humane approaches to illicit drug use in society. This data and HRA's own soon to be released research confirms

that people want more public funds going to harm reduction and treatment and less to punitive law enforcement responses.

“The question therefore becomes, when will governments start to listen to the views of the Australian community and heed the evidence all around them, and address what can only be described as the chronic underfunding of harm reduction which is putting the health and lives of too many people at unnecessary risk” concluded Dr Madden.

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