



Coalition of Alcohol and Drug Educators

Dalgarno
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World Drug Day – June 2021

Breaking News: Music Festival Drug Deaths and associated Harms Plummet to Zero!



Music Festival Drug Deaths and Harms Plummet to Zero

Finally, there is a harm prevention measure that reduce drug harms and drug use.

Coronavirus pandemic means Australia's music festivals are in a devastating 'holding pattern'

Unsurprisingly, it was the shutting down of a music events due to covid restrictions that precipitated the drastic reduction of drug harms simply because there were no drugs being used in these often, drug use contagion events.

This is not a difficult concept to grasp. Drug dependency is classed as a noncommunicable disease (NCD), meaning it is not passed from person to person, in a biological context, but drug use has other contagion catalysts with people facilitated involvement, and therefore the practical 'disease' management priorities still include:

- ✓ reducing exposure, and
- ✓ reducing susceptibility

Of course, both these approaches are complimentary and fundamental to reducing drug harms. In the case of music festivals, the issue is less to do with festivals but squarely around their permissive drug use policy (and even more so around festivals) that alone becomes the causative factor for increasing drug harms, including NCDs.

Conversely, diminishing drug supply within these environments reduces both exposure and susceptibility to drug harms and their attending NCDs, which regrettably in this instance was achieved with the state-wide shutdowns.

If nothing else, it shows that reducing drug supply and demand are all essential symbiotic elements in reducing drug use and its corollary harms. These are reinforced repeatedly within health and law enforcement policy including within the recent Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement, [Public communications campaigns targeting drug and substance abuse \(May 2021\)](#). All three pillars of the *National Drug Strategy* should work together with the goal of restricting drug supply, delaying, denying and/or reducing drug use and educating to decrease drug demand.

But while temporarily shutting down music festivals during covid achieved this end, it is not a long-term solution. The problem lies more with the fact that these environments actively work contrary to these principles through allowing drug supply and then looking to manage its fall out through harm reduction strategies alone. The harm reduction policy pillar is thereby used as a standalone measure that cannot bear the burden of increasing drug use.

Furthermore, pro-drug activists often latch onto this pillar, and misusing it, in isolation from the other two pillars of Harm Minimisation, only serves to keep enabling and endorsing ongoing drug use essentially fuelling greater drug supply and demand. In effect, sabotaging the [National Drug Strategy](#).



A recent article featured in both *The Australian* and *The Daily Telegraph* (pictured below) outlined just how harm reduction is misused when separated from the overall context of the *National Drug Strategy* and its sister document [The National Preventative Health Policy](#)

[Preventative Health Policy](#)

The Dalgarno Institute was contacted for comment and its response was as follows.

*“Information campaigns targeting specific risk-taking, self and community harming activities can and do work **if part of a more thorough culture recalibrating strategy.**”*

‘Warning’ narratives can be crafted in a number of successful ways, as we saw with initial drink driving campaigns in the 80s and clearly the effective anti-tobacco campaign in play now.

However, it is important to note that these messaging vehicles are part of a meta-narrative that challenges not only e.g., drug taking behaviour, but more so the informing factors around this. Messaging includes clear harms, damage, and negative outcomes but more the proactive and protective messaging that not using can bring.

These protective messages are bedded in and informed by a more complete demand reduction narrative that informs all the community in all of the sectors – with no dissenting voice in the marketplace – and this is imperative. One focus – Once Message – One Voice.

A key with any education vehicle success is first removing all cognitive dissonance, and not so much worrying about ‘tastes and flavours’. Though a consideration, these become less of liability when the whole community education campaign isn’t simply reliant on sound bites and memes. Let us educate the community about best-practice of not using drugs not simply create noisy memes in a vacuum.”

DAILYTELEGRAPH.COM.AU FRIDAY MAY 14 2021

03

Pill-test talk is perilous

Harm minimalisation approach ‘misleads public’ that drugs are safe

EXCLUSIVE
CLARISSA BYE

THE trendy, Greens-backed approach to illicit drug taking has “tipped the balance too far” in ignoring the harmful impact of drug crimes on the community, a new parliamentary report has warned.

And despite drug reformers claiming government campaigns against taking drugs don’t work, the parliamentary inquiry has found “many such

campaigns have been effective in reducing drug demand”.

It also heard police fear the promotion of pill testing at music festivals is misleading the public into thinking drugs can be safe.

The Joint Committee on Law Enforcement committee members said the government had a duty to cut future drug use by “preventing or delaying people from starting illicit drug use” in the first place.

Their report recommended

government campaigns include “targeted messages on the dangers of illicit drug use to key cohorts”.

“The committee is concerned that in the laudable approach to reduce harms felt by regular drug users, the harms felt by the broader community in relation to drug-related crimes are being ignored,” the committee found.

“While the problem of illicit drug use must include a health approach, policy and practice

appears to have tipped the balance too far in ignoring the necessity for law enforcement approaches to remain a valuable part of the picture.

“The Police Federation of Australia told the committee they have ongoing concerns with the negative outcomes of some harm minimisation strategies that take the above view, in particular pill-testing, as it is ‘leading people down that path of taking pills and giving them the perception

that it’s safe.” Dalgarno Institute executive director Shane Varcoe welcomed the report, saying other “warning” government campaigns had been successful, such as drink driving campaigns in the 1980s and successful anti-tobacco ads.

Ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi told the inquiry that mass media public health campaigns were “commonly used by authorities around the world” due to their perceived ability to change behaviours

and attitudes. The final report said police organisations and anti-drug campaigners had argued drug-related harms were much broader and “felt by the entire community”.

“These harms ... include road accidents, child maltreatment, victims of crime, impaired work performance and increased staff turnover, the cost of taxpayer-funded health and harm reduction services, border protection and the judicial system.”





Unpacking Zero Music Festival Drug Harms

It seems that the fear of communicable disease, in this case COVID-19, has coordinated the largest ever bipartisan political effort to enact measures that inadvertently prevented music festivals and reduced drug related harms and deaths from those *NCD contagion* environments.

This unintended consequence proved that primary prevention intervention can and does work where there is the collective, coordinated effort to do so and is something pro-drug lobbyists repeatedly insisted could never happen. That is, that 'drug taking' harms could not stop at music festivals. As noted earlier, the long-term solution is not to stop festivals but understand the policy mechanisms that allow these deaths to continue.

These include:

- No preventative interventions for people dying or severely harmed through the ingestion of psychotropic toxins.
- No policing interventions to stop the reckless and criminal activity from acquiring illicit drugs once within festivals – some of which are used for other criminal purposes such as rape and assault.
- Free ambulance and paramedic services diverted to entirely preventable drug use harms at the cost to majority non-drug using taxpayer public.

Comparing Covid-19 Compliance with Drug Policy Practice

Once again, contrast many drink driving or speeding campaigns such as ***Catching you before someone gets hurt*** and a plethora of other such as preventative social and health campaigns to tackle everything from domestic violence, mental health, cancer, sugary

drinks, tobacco and of course most recent year-long covid-19 restrictions, with the lack of political will to aggressively intervene in drug permissive environments including the latest approval for another supervised drug injecting site against the objections of severely struggling traders and residents.¹



Covid restrictions particularly in Victoria are significant as it illustrates the lengths governments can go to against a threat, they deem sufficiently menacing to public health, even if it means suspending the civil rights of the majority of healthy and able-bodied citizens and meting out punitive punishments that surpass those seen for drug offences. When Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews

¹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9618895/New-Melbourne-drug-injecting-room-CBD-overrun-meth-heroin-addicts.html>

were asked about citizens who refuse to comply with trade, gathering and movement restrictions, their reactions were unified. Not only did they agree on zero tolerance but justified the use of an extensive police force, extra security services, drone and licence plate surveillance and the military to ensure total compliance.

This demonstrates that politicians and police can compel people to change their behaviour with the aim of:

- i) not causing others harm
- ii) not putting our medical and emergency staff at risk of harm and
- iii) unnecessarily clogging up our hospital system.

However, that is not the case when the issue centres on illegal ‘recreational’ use of psychotropic toxins despite causing many preventable morbidity and mortality outcomes while richly lining the pockets of drug cartels and simultaneously corrupting our government policies. But most disturbingly, drug use is enabled and equipped through active advocacy that permit illicit drug use and entirely misuse harm reduction policy mechanisms.

This is seen most glaringly from *Daily Telegraph* Journalist Amelia Saw reporting on a federally funded website giving “startling” advice encouraging addicts to stockpile illicit substance ahead of an expected drug shortage due to the coronavirus. The online organisation, counsellingonline.org.au, which receives \$1.5 million from taxpayers, instructed addicts, “Talk to your dealer about what might happen if your regular drug supply may be restricted and stock up on your drugs of choice.” Ms Saw said while this statement has since been removed from the website, the *Department of Health* defended the advice, arguing it was “in line with harm reduction guidelines”.

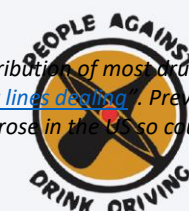
The department went on to explain that “there is a drug using community in Australia and people are going to continue to use drugs throughout the pandemic.”

“While it may seem like a good thing for supply lines to be shut down and people to be forced into involuntary withdrawal, the reality is “people in severe withdrawal have symptoms that are very similar to COVID-19” such as a runny nose, headache and fever. Having these people present en masse would place an extraordinary strain on the health care system and drug withdrawal symptoms such as coughing could cause “quite a bit of anxiety in the community”.

Sky News host Peta Credlin said a “harder line” was necessary in this situation since taking illicit substances was against the law and the statement released by the website essentially was “advertising for more business for dealers”. “I would like to see the \$1.5 million going to help the addicts in this time when supply is constrained... rather than advising or encouraging them to stockpile,” she said.

Clearly this is a case in point that it is hardly ever a matter of civic and political capacity or financial resources, but which issue politicians are willing to support.





Meanwhile while the pandemic restrictions have temporarily affected supply lines², it is a small and temporary setback to the obscenely lucrative criminal market³ that is set to explode.

As the collateral damage and unintended consequences from this period of social and economic paralysis are still unfolding – including increased serious crime, suicide, mental health, domestic violence coupled with decreased education, predatory online grooming and less employment opportunities in a quickly rising welfare economy – all these factors will without doubt converge and snowball to create a massive boon for already extremely cashed up underworld operators (particular within drug trafficking),⁴ who have a long established historical record in expertly adapting to exploit these exact set of conditions.⁵

And as always those most effected will be those who can least afford the fallout – the young, vulnerable, poor and indigenous communities, effectively condemning them onto an endless wheel of intergenerational addiction-crime-debt cycles.⁶ The result will be a doubling or even greater blow out to already struggling individuals, families, communities, businesses, health and welfare sectors and the nations law and order.

Considering the magnitude of these gradually unfolding dire circumstances *The Dalgarno Institute and the Demand Reduction and Recovery Sector* submits the following recommendations:

- ✓ Banning music festivals with a repeated history of permissive drug supply and drug use harms.
- ✓ Appropriate legislation put in place to ensure that costs – legal and medical – of preventable drug using harms directly caused through passive or active permissive drug supply policies are met by festival organisers not government and the majority nondrug using taxpayers.
- ✓ Further, costs awarded against other external organisations that actively advocate for drug using.

² <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dygebg/drug-dealers-how-coronavirus-affecting-business> As borders close, supply and distribution of most drugs is restricted, particularly those including Spice that rely on ingredients sourced in China. The edict to stay at home affects "county lines dealing". Previous heroin droughts in the UK and Australia saw temporary falls in deaths but more recently deaths from synthetic opioid fentanyl rose in the US so could also do in the UK. Ian Hamilton reports.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/12/coronavirus-triggers-uk-shortage-of-illicit-drugs>

<https://www.crew.scot/covid-drug-markets-survey-week-one/>

https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/z3bdy5/addicted-heroin-user-diary-lockdown-coronavirus

<https://theknow.denverpost.com/2020/03/17/denver-420-cannabis-festival-canceled-coronavirus/235548/>

<https://www.skynews.com.au/details/6152533810001>

³ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-cartel-of-australian-mr-bigs-responsible-for-1-5b-drug-imports-20210603-p57xp0.html>

⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3400577/Ho-w-31-Calabrian-mafia-families-control-60-percent-Australia-s-drug-trade.html>

<https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2020-04-18-how-organised-crime-is-exploiting-covid-19/>

Children spending exponentially greater screen time has meant more predatory online activity especially from sex and drug traffickers.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19s-devastating-impact-children>

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-coronavirus-slavery-drugs-trf-idUSKBN27M1N2>

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/exploiting-isolation-sexual-predators-increasingly-targeting-children-during-covid-pandemic>

⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/15/the-pandemic-is-putting-gangsters-in-power/>

<https://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/index.html>

⁶ This is because organised crime is exploitative in nature and much like a virus -- silent, invisible. Both creating and thriving on human and societal deterioration.

- ✓ Substance dependant individuals given mandatory drug use exiting and accountable recovery programs as alternative to criminal proceedings.

It is time for far greater proactive measures in the arena of drug use as NCDs for the health and well-being of all our citizens and future generations with a focus on best-practice policies that incorporate all the pillars of the National Drug Strategy as these will also reduce the strain of limited medical and health facilities.

Communications Team, Dalgarno Institute

Further Reading

Ecstasy Deaths – Red Card on Pill Testing

<https://www.nobrainier.org.au/index.php/teacher-tools/get-a-clue-partae/511-ecstasy-deaths-red-card-on-pill-testing>

Time to **#preventdontpromote**

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