



What does the research evidence tell us about what Australians think about the legal status of drugs?

Alison Ritter & Francis Matthew-Simmons

Introduction

This bulletin summarises data from a nationally representative survey of Australians¹ on the legal status of drugs. We draw an important distinction between what Australians think about “legalisation” versus “decriminalisation”, and what Australians think about different types of drugs (four drugs are compared: cannabis, ecstasy, heroin and meth/amphetamine).

Key points

- More than half Australians agree with decriminalisation actions for the personal use of cannabis, heroin and methamphetamine. This does not mean they support decriminalising the sale and supply of these drugs.
- Less than one quarter of Australians support the legalisation of cannabis, heroin, ecstasy, and methamphetamine.
- Australians do make a distinction between legalisation and decriminalisation options.

Legalisation of drugs

Australians are asked whether they think that the personal use of drugs should be made legal. This question effectively asks people to think about drug use only (not to think about the sale or supply of drugs).

Table 1: Support for legalisation

	Males	Females	Persons
Cannabis			
Support legalisation	25.3%	19.5%	22.3%
Ecstasy			
Support legalisation	7.3%	5.1%	6.2%
Heroin			
Support legalisation	6.1%	4.9%	5.5%
Meth/Amphetamine			
Support legalisation	5.0%	4.2%	4.6%

Footnote: There are some people who don't know whether they support legalisation for personal use or not. These figures ranged between 7.9% don't know for cannabis to 8.1% don't know for heroin.

- 51% of Australians oppose the legalisation of cannabis for personal use.
- More than 80% of Australians oppose the legalisation of heroin and methamphetamine for personal use.
- More than 75% of Australians oppose the legalisation of ecstasy for personal use.

¹ These data are re-analyses of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's National Drug Strategy Household Survey. In 2010, the total sample size was 26,648. The survey uses a multistage, stratified area random sample design. Data have been weighted to represent the Australian population.



Decriminalisation of drugs

We define decriminalisation as a reduction of legal penalties. This can be done by either changing them from criminal to civil penalties, such as fines (as has occurred in some Australian states such as SA, ACT and NT for cannabis), or by diverting drug use offenders away from a criminal conviction and into education or treatment (known as 'diversion', and which is applied across Australia). Decriminalisation applies to drug use and possession offences, not to the sale or supply of drugs.

When asked "What single action best describes what you think should happen to anyone found in possession of small quantities of cannabis/ecstasy/heroin/methamphetamine?" participants selected from a range of responses:

Decriminalisation actions include: no action; caution/warning; referral to education; referral to treatment; and small fine (\$200).

Criminalisation actions include substantial fine (\$1000); community service; weekend detention; prison; or other.

The table below shows what Australians think about decriminalisation actions for each drug:

Table 2: Support for decriminalisation actions

	Males	Females	Persons
Cannabis			
Support for decriminalisation actions	72.3%	73%	72.7%
Ecstasy			
Support for decriminalisation actions	50%	53.7%	51.9%
Heroin			
Support for decriminalisation actions	42.7%	49.4%	46%
Meth/Amphetamine			
Support for decriminalisation actions	44.1%	50.1%	47.1%

Footnote: Some people don't know what they think about decriminalisation. This represented 4% of the sample

- The vast majority of Australians support decriminalisation actions for cannabis use
- Half of all Australians support decriminalisation actions for ecstasy use.
- Just under half of Australians support decriminalisation actions for heroin and methamphetamine use.