

18 Community perceptions of drug problems in society

Drugs thought to be associated with a 'drug problem'

The 1998 survey asked respondents to name drugs that were causing a 'drug problem' in Australia. The survey showed that 37% of Australians aged 14 years and over listed heroin as the top drug associated with a 'drug problem' (Table 18.1). A further one-fifth (21%) of Australians reported marijuana/cannabis as the problem drug. The proportion of people who first thought of alcohol as a problem drug was 14%, followed by amphetamines/speed (13%). Only one in 25 (4%) Australians aged 14 years and over thought of tobacco as the top problem drug.

Table 18.1: Drugs associated with a drug problem: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 1998

Drugs	Males	Females	Persons
		(per cent)	
Alcohol	14.9	13.2	14.0
Tobacco	4.3	4.0	4.2
Tea/coffee/caffeine	0.3	0.3	0.3
Barbiturates	0.2	0.2	0.2
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	0.5	0.9	0.7
Pain-killers/analgesics	0.4	0.5	0.4
Steroids	0.4	0.3	0.3
Inhalants	0.2	0.3	0.3
Marijuana/hashish/cannabis resin	20.4	21.2	20.8
Naturally occurring hallucinogens	0.5	0.3	0.4
LSD/synthetic hallucinogens	0.4	1.6	1.0
Amphetamines/speed	13.5	12.6	13.0
Heroin	37.6	37.3	37.4
Cocaine	3.9	4.1	4.0
Ecstasy/designer drugs	1.1	1.3	1.2
Drugs other than listed	1.0	1.2	1.1
None/can't think of any	0.5	0.8	0.7

Most serious concern regarding drug use/activity in the community

In 1998 the survey asked respondents to nominate one drug use/activity which in their view was the most serious concern for the general community. Of the 14 drug uses/activities listed, the survey showed that:

- One in four (25%) Australians aged 14 years and over reported excess drinking of alcohol as the most serious concern for the general community (Table 18.2).
- Use of heroin was reported as the most serious concern by a further one-quarter (24%) of Australians aged 14 years and over.

- More than one in six (17%) Australians aged 14 years and over nominated tobacco smoking as the most serious concern for the general community.
- Sharing of needles or syringes was reported as the most serious drug-related activity by 14% of Australians aged 14 years and over.
- Males (26%) were more likely to report heroin use as the most serious concern for the general community compared with females (22%).

Table 18.2: Drug use/activity that is the most serious concern for the general community: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 1998

Drug use/activity	Males	Females (per cent)	Persons
Marijuana/ hash use	4.1	4.4	4.3
Tobacco smoking	18.0	16.3	17.1
Heroin use	26.1	21.5	23.8
Sharing needles or syringes	11.5	16.4	14.0
Excessive use of barbiturates	1.0	0.6	0.8
Excessive drinking of alcohol	24.2	25.2	24.7
Excessive use of tranquillisers	0.3	0.8	0.5
Sniffing glue/petrol/solvents/rush	1.9	1.4	1.6
Ecstasy/designer drug use	3.4	4.5	4.0
Amphetamine/speed use	1.6	1.7	1.6
Cocaine/crack use	5.4	4.7	5.1
Hallucinogen use	0.3	0.4	0.3
Excessive use of pain-killers/analgesics	0.8	1.4	1.1
Steroid use	0.7	0.2	0.4
None of these	0.6	0.4	0.5

Acceptability of regular use of drugs

The 1998 survey asked respondents about their personal opinions on whether it was acceptable for an adult to regularly use a variety of drugs. In general, approval for regular use of drugs was not very high, except for alcohol. The data showed that:

- More than three-fifths (61%) of Australians aged 14 years or over reported it was acceptable for an adult to regularly use alcohol.
- Two-fifths (40%) of Australians aged 14 years and over thought regular use of tobacco/cigarettes by an adult was acceptable.
- More than one-quarter (26%) thought regular use of marijuana/cannabis by an adult was acceptable.
- In general, males were more likely than females to approve regular use of drugs by an adult.

Table 18.3: Acceptability of regular use of drugs by an adult: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 1998

Drugs	Males	Females	Persons
		(per cent)	
Tobacco/cigarettes ^(a)	42.1	38.2	40.2
Alcohol ^(a)	67.8	54.8	61.2
Pain-killers/analgesics ^(b)	10.6	8.6	9.6
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills ^(b)	7.3	3.8	5.5
Steroids ^(b)	3.9	0.9	2.4
Barbiturates ^(b)	2.7	0.7	1.7
Marijuana/cannabis ^(c)	30.5	20.6	25.5
Heroin ^(c)	2.9	0.8	1.8
Amphetamines ^(c)	4.6	1.6	3.1
Cocaine/crack ^(c)	3.8	1.1	2.4
Naturally occurring hallucinogens ^(c)	6.4	2.2	4.3
LSD/synthetic hallucinogens ^(c)	4.5	1.4	2.9
Ecstasy/designer drugs ^(c)	5.1	1.5	3.3
Glue/petrol/solvents/rush ^(c)	1.7	0.3	1.0
Methadone ^(b)	2.8	0.8	1.8

(a) Regular use means every day.

(b) For non-medical purposes.

(c) Regular use means used at least once a month.

Opinion on legal status of possession of marijuana/cannabis for personal use

When respondents were asked to express their opinion on whether the possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use should be legal or illegal, the survey showed that:

- Half (50%) of all Australians aged 14 years and over said that possession of a small quantity of marijuana/cannabis for personal use should be illegal, while 43% preferred it to be legal.
- More females (54%) than males (46%) expressed the view that the possession of a small quantity of marijuana/cannabis should be illegal.
- More persons aged 40 years and over preferred marijuana/cannabis to be illegal, while proportionally more persons aged 14–39 years preferred the possession of small quantities of it to be legal.

Table 18.4: Preferred legal status of possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Preferred status	Age group						All ages
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
Males							
Legal	49.1	61.1	55.9	49.6	37.1	28.7	47.4
Illegal	42.0	33.7	38.5	43.1	56.5	65.3	46.2
Unsure	8.9	5.3	5.6	7.3	6.4	6.0	6.4
Females							
Legal	43.9	50.7	44.9	37.3	38.9	21.0	38.6
Illegal	47.4	40.8	46.3	56.8	56.5	72.5	54.2
Unsure	8.7	8.5	8.8	5.9	4.6	6.6	7.2
Persons							
Legal	46.6	56.0	50.4	43.5	38.0	24.5	42.9
Illegal	44.6	37.2	42.4	49.9	56.5	69.2	50.3
Unsure	8.8	6.9	7.2	6.6	5.5	6.3	6.8

When respondents were further asked whether possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use should be a criminal offence, the survey showed that:

- Nearly half (48%) of all Australians aged 14 years and over reported that possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use should be a criminal offence (Table 18.5).
- Slightly more males (50%) than females (47%) reported that the possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use should be a criminal offence.

Table 18.5: Preference for criminality of possession of a small quantity of marijuana/cannabis for personal use: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Preference	Age group						All ages
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
Males							
Yes	50.1	47.7	47.9	48.4	46.9	55.8	50.0
No	37.8	43.6	38.0	43.6	46.1	32.4	39.7
Unsure	12.1	8.7	14.0	8.0	7.0	11.8	10.3
Females							
Yes	45.8	55.6	48.9	44.5	50.0	41.1	46.8
No	38.0	28.7	39.5	45.5	38.2	44.9	40.2
Unsure	16.2	15.7	11.6	10.1	11.8	14.0	13.0
Persons							
Yes	47.9	52.1	48.5	46.2	48.4	47.4	48.2
No	37.9	35.3	38.8	44.7	42.3	39.5	40.0
Unsure	14.2	12.6	12.7	9.2	9.3	13.1	11.8

When those respondents who said the possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis should be illegal were further asked what type of penalties they would prefer if a person was found in possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use, 36%

reported a compulsory drug education program as a penalty (Table 18.6). The survey also showed that:

- Of those Australians aged 14 years and over who preferred possession of small quantity of marijuana/cannabis to be illegal, one in 25 (4%) preferred a gaol sentence as a penalty.
- More than one in five (21%) said they preferred a fine of up to \$200.
- One in six (16%) preferred a substantial fine of around \$1,000.
- More than one in ten (12%) preferred a caution or warning as a penalty for possessing a small quantity of marijuana/cannabis for personal use.
- More females (39%) than males (32%) preferred a compulsory education program as a penalty for persons possessing a small quantity of marijuana/cannabis for personal use.

Table 18.6: Preferred penalty for possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Type of penalty	Age group						All ages
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
Males							
A caution or warning only	13.4	11.6	8.2	5.8	15.2	16.5	12.0
Something similar to a parking fine, up to \$200	31.0	31.5	22.0	15.9	17.7	20.8	22.2
A compulsory drug education program	24.8	19.4	32.6	42.0	42.4	29.5	32.4
A substantial fine, around \$1,000	16.9	22.2	21.5	12.2	11.5	15.6	16.3
A community service order	5.3	5.5	6.2	6.5	4.0	4.5	5.3
Weekend detention	0.7 *	0.7 *	1.7	2.3	—	2.4	1.5
A gaol sentence	4.0	2.9	3.9	4.6	6.3	8.0	5.3
Some other arrangement	3.8	6.1	3.9	10.7	2.8	2.6	4.9
Females							
A caution or warning only	11.1	8.2	9.1	11.9	13.0	17.8	12.6
Something similar to a parking fine, up to \$200	30.8	26.6	22.0	16.5	12.2	15.3	19.3
A compulsory drug education program	21.9	29.2	33.2	47.5	48.6	42.0	38.7
A substantial fine, around \$1,000	22.3	25.0	20.2	11.9	12.8	12.6	16.5
A community service order	6.4	3.1	8.5	5.4	4.2	6.3	5.7
Weekend detention	1.7	0.6	1.5	0.3 *	0.2 *	1.1	0.9
A gaol sentence	2.8	2.5	2.5	3.2	5.0	3.7	3.3
Some other arrangement	3.0	4.6	3.1	3.4	4.0	1.3	3.0
Persons							
A caution or warning only	12.2	9.7	8.7	9.2	14.1	17.2	12.3
Something similar to a parking fine, up to \$200	30.9	28.8	22.0	16.2	15.0	17.7	20.6
A compulsory drug education program	23.3	24.9	32.9	45.0	45.4	36.6	35.9
A substantial fine, around \$1,000	19.7	23.8	20.8	12.0	12.2	13.9	16.4
A community service order	5.9	4.2	7.4	5.9	4.1	5.5	5.5
Weekend detention	1.2	0.7	1.6	1.2	0.1 *	1.6	1.1
A gaol sentence	3.4	2.7	3.1	3.8	5.7	5.6	4.2
Some other arrangement	3.4	5.3	3.5	6.6	3.4	1.9	3.9

Note: Base equals only those reporting that the possession of small quantities of marijuana/cannabis for personal use should be illegal.

Potential consumption rate of marijuana/cannabis if it was legal to use

The 1998 survey asked the respondents what they would do if marijuana/cannabis was legal to use. The data showed that four-fifths of Australians aged 14 years and over would not use marijuana/cannabis even if it was legal and available. The survey showed that only one in 20 (5%) Australians aged 14 years and over would try it if marijuana/cannabis was legal and available. The survey further showed that more females (84%) than males (76%) would not use marijuana/cannabis even if it was legal and available.

Table 18.7: Expected rate of consumption of marijuana/cannabis if it was legal to use: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 1998

Intention	Males	Females (per cent)	Persons
Not use it	76.4	84.1	80.3
Try it	5.9	4.5	5.2
Use it about as often as I do now	12.5	7.5	10.0
Use it more often than I do now	1.1	0.7	0.9
Use it less often than I do now	0.7	0.5	0.6
Don't know	3.4	2.5	3.0

Preferred resource allocation to reduce the use of various drugs

In 1998, respondents were asked to allocate \$100 in three areas – education, treatment and law enforcement – to reduce the use of drugs. In all, respondents were asked to allocate resources for five drug categories – alcohol, tobacco, marijuana/cannabis, amphetamines, and heroin/cocaine. The data showed that people tend to allocate resources differently in order to reduce the use of different drugs. For example:

- Except for heroin and cocaine use, Australians aged 14 years and over preferred to spend more resources on education than other measures to reduce the use of drugs (Table 18.8). Australians aged 14 years and over preferred to spend half of all available resources on education in order to reduce the use of tobacco, while a little over one-third (\$36) of available resources was allocated on education to reduce the use of drugs such as heroin and cocaine.
- Almost equal amounts were allocated to treatment activities in order to reduce the use of alcohol (\$31) and tobacco (\$30), while drugs such as marijuana/cannabis (\$25), amphetamines (\$24), and heroin/cocaine (\$25) received slightly lower allocations for treatment activities.
- Australians preferred to spend large amounts of resources on law enforcement in order to reduce the use of heroin and cocaine, with nearly \$40 allocated to law enforcement to reduce the use of these drugs, compared with only \$19 for tobacco and \$26 for alcohol.

Table 18.8: Hypothetical allocation of \$100 to reduce the use of various drugs, by sex, Australia, 1998

Areas	Alcohol	Tobacco	Marijuana/ cannabis	Amphetamine	Heroin/cocaine
(Mean \$)					
Males					
Education	45.60	52.20	48.30	39.90	36.60
Treatment	28.30	28.70	23.10	22.40	23.00
Law enforcement	26.10	19.10	28.60	37.70	40.40
Females					
Education	42.00	48.30	43.10	37.40	34.60
Treatment	33.00	32.10	27.00	26.30	26.90
Law enforcement	25.00	19.60	29.90	36.30	38.50
Persons					
Education	43.80	50.20	45.70	38.70	35.60
Treatment	30.70	30.40	25.10	24.40	25.00
Law enforcement	25.50	19.40	29.30	37.00	39.50