

Minimising the harm of illicit drug use among young adults — exploring the data and the strategies that work

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Introduction: Young adults (18-25 years) are the age-group most likely to use illicit drugs in Australia. What is less known is the settings, patterns of use, and high-risk sub-groups within this demographic. Developing effective messaging that engages young adults is critical to any harm reduction efforts. The aim of this research was to understand these factors in the Australian context and offer recommendations for harm reduction messaging aimed at young adults.

Methods: Research was undertaken by the Drug Policy Modelling Program in two parts. Firstly, a review of relevant data sources to determine illicit drug use patterns, and secondly a review of effective approaches to harm reduction messaging for young adults.

Key findings: The data identified several high-risk patterns and subgroups at increased risk of harm; specifically:

- subgroups (young males, trainees/apprentices, LGBTIQ+)
- drug types (ecstasy, cocaine, methamphetamine)
- drug behaviours (polydrug use, Party and Play)
- high-risk venues (nightclubs, bars, music festivals).

Key components for effective harm reduction messaging included:

- young adult involvement in co-design critical for message relevancy and acceptability
- addressing the environment, pressures, and interactions that contribute to high drug use in specific settings
- non-judgemental, incorporating young adult experiences with drug taking

Discussion and conclusions: Young adult males and LGBTIQ+ young adults have drug use patterns and behaviours that put them at higher risk of drug harm. Harm reduction efforts targeting sub-groups within these groups are needed. Targeted harm reduction messaging for young adults should be positive, truthful and culturally relevant. The engagement of young adults in co-design is critical to achieving this.

Implications for Practice: Program/service evaluation of community and peer-led organisations already working with these groups would help build the evidence base for future harm reduction efforts.

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