



## **Time to explore decriminalisation of drug use on International Overdose Awareness Day**

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The ongoing criminalisation of drug use contributes significantly to health and community harms, including the transmission of blood-borne viruses, overdose, and entrenched social and economic disadvantage.

On International Overdose Awareness Day – August 31 – Burnet Institute endorses the call to reform current policy responses to drug use, including exploring opportunities to decriminalise drug use.

The decriminalisation of drug use and drug possession for personal use will help to reduce stigma, deaths from overdose and discrimination towards people who use drugs.

In 2019, Victoria recorded 449 unintentional drug-induced deaths out of a total of 1,644 nationwide, according to Penington Institute's [Australia's Annual Overdose Report 2021](#).

Victoria has seen the biggest increase in recent years of unintentional overdose deaths compared to all other Australian states or territories – increasing from 3.8 per 100,000 people in 2012 to 6.8 per 100,000 people in 2019.

Unlike other health and social issues, responses to drug dependence continue to focus on criminal justice approaches, Professor Mark Stoové, Burnet Institute Head of Public Health, said.

“Yet evidence from around the world is consistent – criminalisation of drug use and the incarceration of people who use drugs is neither a deterrent to drug use, nor does it make the community safer,” Professor Stoové said.

“Indeed, incarcerating people for drug-related crime perpetuates individual and community harm, as well as coming at a significant cost to governments.

“Burnet is arguing it’s time to seriously consider a range of new policy responses to dealing with drug use in the community, and we’re backing the stance taken by Harm Reduction Victoria and other organisations that it’s time for real change.

“This needs to consider decriminalisation of drug use and a commitment to avoiding the incarceration of people for drug-related offences,” Professor Stoové said.

In addition, we're recommending evidence-based approaches to improving clarity and consistency in defining quantities that constitute possession for personal use across different substances.

We believe that reforming Victoria's drug laws is crucial to minimising harm, including overdose.

"The criminalisation of drug use generates and perpetuates the overdose crisis through stigma and fear," Professor Stoové said.

"Evidence suggests that people who avoid a criminal record have improved social, educational and employment outcomes.

"People who fear arrest, incarceration, stigma and discrimination are also less likely to access health and harm reduction services."

Burnet Institute has conducted research with people who use drugs for over 30 years.

We apply a public health approach to drug use to improve the health and wellbeing of people who use drugs and the people around them.

Every year on [International Overdose Awareness Day](#) (August 31) we remember the people we have lost to overdose.

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