1. Improving Health Promotion to Reduce Drug Harms

Health promotion should shift from a focus on prevention and abstinence to a harm reduction approach that takes no moral stance. This includes:

Expanding safe injecting centres and drug consumption rooms: These facilities provide a controlled environment, reduce the risk of overdose, and connect people to support services. However, broader policy reforms, like regulating substances, would better control harms related to adulterated drugs.

Investing in widespread drug checking services: Both fixed and mobile sites should be implemented, particularly in rural and regional areas, to help users identify harmful substances before consumption. Further there should be drug checking services that are always offered at all festivals and places where youth gather.

These services should be accessible at all festivals, clubs, and gatherings where young people are likely to be. The idea is not to endorse drug use but to acknowledge that it happens and to prioritise safety. This pragmatic approach could prevent countless hospitalizations and save lives, especially in environments where drug use is prevalent but information is scarce.

Education campaigns should be evidence-based and not fear-driven: They should focus on realistic drug education, co-designed with individuals with lived experience, to provide accurate information on the effects, risks, and safer ways to use substances. This includes understanding the differences between different drugs and harm reduction strategies into educational content.

Public health campaigns should focus on the intersections of mental health and drug use, providing a more holistic approach to drug education and harm reduction.

2. Improving Equitable Access and Inclusion for People Seeking Support

Equitable access can be enhanced by:

Peer-led services and LLE (Lived and Living Experience) workforce: Involving people with lived experience in service design and delivery ensures that support is accessible, respectful, and non-judgmental. As the youth of Western Sydney, we often face the harsh realities of over-policing and punitive laws that disproportionately affect our communities. Despite being the most impacted, we rarely have a say in how we are supported, and we often lack access to the services that would genuinely benefit us.

We need approaches that truly understand our experiences and challenges. Many of us would feel more comfortable and trusting when speaking to someone with lived experience, rather than authorities or healthcare professionals who, in the past, have often treated us with stigma and disrespect.

Investing in peer-led services and prioritising voices with lived and living experience in service design can bridge the gap, rebuild trust, and provide the kind of support we actually need. It's time for policies that empower us, rather than criminalise us, and for services that meet us where we are, without judgement.

Integrated services and referrals: Establishing seamless connections between various health, social, and legal services can address the multiple needs of people who use drugs. For example, expanding access to methadone treatment and reducing barriers in opioid substitution therapy (OST) can support individuals in recovery.

Reforming existing laws: Section 29 of the Drug Misuse and Trafficking Act 1985 (NSW) (‘DMTA’) requires repeal or reform, to shift the burden of proof to the state rather than individuals. Currently, people charged with possessing a traffickable quantity of an illicit substance are considered “deemed suppliers” and are required to disprove that they possessed the drug with the intent to supply. However, according to Schedule 1 of the DMTA, the difference between a small amount and a traffickable quantity can be as little as 2 grams. For example, a small amount of heroin is 1 gram, but a traffickable quantity is 3 grams. When considered in the context of section 4, which counts the weight of the drug’s admixture as included in the weight of the drug, this has the potential to create unjust outcomes for people who use drugs and may be subject to trumped up charges. Shifting the burden of proof back to the state to prove that an individual intended to supply an illicit substance ensures fair legal treatment and reduces the stigma associated with drug use.

3. Ensuring a Fair, Proportionate, and Effective Law Enforcement Response

NSW can improve the fairness and effectiveness of its law enforcement approach by:

Banning strip searches at festivals and revising the requirement for probable cause. Given the low accuracy of current search practices, stricter regulations should reduce police discretion and increase accountability to prevent harm.

Implementing recommendations from the Law Enforcement Commission report and supporting calls for more transparent policing practices. Section 31(b) of the Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002 (NSW) provides that strip searches can be undertaken if "the police officer suspects on reasonable grounds that the strip search is necessary for the purposes of the search and that the seriousness and urgency of the circumstances make the strip search necessary". However, only 30% of strip searches reflected a consideration of the "seriousness and urgency" requirements and only 27% of strip search records indicated that police followed strip search rules about conduct and preserving the privacy and dignity of the person (Law Enforcement Conduct Commission 2023).

Decriminalising drug possession to shift the focus from punitive measures to empathy and health-based responses. This change can improve the relationship between law enforcement and communities, restoring trust and cooperation. Young people are more prone to engaging in risky behaviour such as experimentation with drugs (AIHW 2024). Drug education, not criminalisation, is the most appropriate way to address this. Most young people who try drugs will not continue to use drugs habitually (Alcohol and Drug Foundation 2022). For example, the young person who uses MDMA at a festival is unlikely to develop a dependence on MDMA. However, the young person who is humiliated and traumatised during a strip search by police at a festival is subject to far more long-term harm. Additionally, the young person who is arrested and charged with a drug offence, especially one that results in a term of imprisonment, is likely to experience ongoing marginalisation, difficulty obtaining employment, and difficulty obtaining housing. They will also experience feelings of worthlessness due to social exclusion from their criminal record and a greater likelihood of engaging in future problematic drug use due to social alienation and deterioration in their mental health. Therefore, decriminalising drug use and possession protects young people from the marginalising effect of a criminal record and renders strip searches unnecessary.

4. Keeping Young People Safe and Supporting Families

To protect young people and support families:

Introduce harm reduction-focused education programs in schools, designed in collaboration with people who use drugs, to provide honest and practical information on substance use. The focus should be on equipping young people with knowledge and skills to make informed decisions rather than solely promoting abstinence.

Expand mental health support services and integrate them with drug education to address the underlying causes of drug use, such as trauma or mental health challenges.

Many young people in Western Sydney have seen firsthand the devastating effects of drug addiction within their families. This often means watching a parent, sibling, or other loved one struggle with substance dependence, leading to a range of emotional challenges. These young people frequently carry the weight of anxiety, shame, and even guilt, feeling responsible for a situation far beyond their control.

The trauma of living with addiction in the family can manifest in numerous ways—missed school, financial instability, and a constant sense of uncertainty. For some, it means stepping into adult roles prematurely, looking after siblings or managing household responsibilities when parents are unable to do so. The emotional toll of these experiences can have long-lasting effects, influencing their mental health, education, and future relationships.

We have experienced the impact of drug addiction on our families and so we are vocal advocates for change. We argue that the current punitive drug policies fail to address the root causes of substance use and addiction. Instead of offering support, these policies criminalise individuals struggling with addiction, creating cycles of incarceration and marginalisation that can tear families apart.

We believe in a compassionate approach to drug policy, one that focuses on harm reduction, treatment, and support services. We argue that addiction should be treated as a health issue, not a criminal one. For us, this shift is essential not only to protect those struggling with addiction but also to support their families, who often face social stigma and isolation. We believe that drug policy should not take a moral stance or be paternalistic. Rather, it should emphasise the continuing reality of drug use amongst young people and provide an informed, evidence based framework in which to support young people who interact with drugs.

5. Ensuring Effective Integrated Support and Social Services

Integrated services are critical for comprehensive support:

Expand the availability of safe injecting centres, drug consumption rooms, and drug checking services. These services should be integrated with healthcare, housing, and social support to create a holistic safety net.

An essential aspect of health promotion for people experiencing drug dependency includes investment in Medically Supervised Injection Centres (MSICs). Currently, there is only one in NSW, located in Kings Cross. Victoria also has an MSIC in Richmond, which has safely managed 7,049 overdose events between 2018 and August 2023 (Alcohol and Drug Foundation 2023). Additionally, the Kings Cross MISC has reversed approximately 11,000 overdoses since 2001 and 'provided over 20,420 referrals to treatment and services' (Alcohol and Drug Foundation 2023). Not only are MSIC's highly effective at saving lives and preventing the spread of blood borne viruses by providing sterile injecting equipment, but they are also an important vehicle to rebuild the trust between people who use drugs and healthcare providers by providing safe and non-judgemental spaces (Alcohol and Drug Foundation 2023). MISCs may also act as a point of first contact for referrals to services. By using MISCs as an initial point of contact for wrap-around support, outreach to people who require it can be better effected.

Prioritise funding for peer-led services that are more accessible and better received by people who use drugs.

Reform methadone treatment regulations to make it easier for individuals to access maintenance therapy, which can reduce relapse rates and improve long-term outcomes.

6. Top 3 Issues That Need to be Addressed

1. Harm Reduction Approaches

SSDP Australia strongly advocates for a significant shift towards harm reduction strategies. These include introducing drug checking services, providing meaningful drug education that goes beyond prevention, and supporting peer-led harm reduction initiatives. This approach prioritises public health by reducing the risks associated with drug use. Immediate actions include implementing fixed-sites and mobile drug checking services, distributing reagent testing kits, and creating accessible early warning systems that involve people who use drugs in the design and delivery of these services. Harm reduction services must be adequately funded and integrated into community spaces to support the health and well-being of young people.

One of the most pressing concerns is that Western Sydney youth feel excluded from the conversations and decisions that directly affect them. We want to be part of the solution, advocating for policies that reflect our lived experiences. We believe that peer-led harm reduction services are far more effective because they come from a place of understanding and shared experience. We as young people are more likely to trust those who have been through similar situations rather than authority figures who may have previously treated them with suspicion or hostility.

We advocate for the implementation of services like drug checking, which would allow us to make informed choices in a non-judgmental environment. We want to see a future where harm reduction resources, such as reagent testing kits and educational materials, are readily available on university and TAFE campuses, in community centres, and at public events.

2. Policing Practices

There is an urgent need to reform policing methods, particularly around the use of drug detection dogs, strip searches, and drug driving legislation. Current practices, such as zero-tolerance drug driving laws and invasive strip searches, are seen as punitive and disproportionately impact young people. Evidence indicates these measures are not only ineffective but harmful, leading to distrust between law enforcement and communities. SSDP Australia calls for a shift towards a policing model that focuses on community care and harm reduction, rather than criminalization. This includes reviewing drug driving laws to focus on impairment rather than mere presence of substances, banning the use of drug dogs and strip searches for drug policing, and ensuring accountability in policing methods.

Western Sydney's young people are calling for an urgent shift from punitive approaches to harm reduction. Many of us have witnessed friends and peers experience the negative consequences of heavy-handed policing, such as the use of drug detection dogs at festivals or strip searches that feel more like harassment than public safety measures. The youth here believe that these practices do not deter drug use but instead drive it underground,

increasing the risks associated with it. We argue that policies should focus on keeping people safe, not criminalising them. For many, harm reduction is not just a policy preference; it's a matter of life and death, given the prevalence of dangerous, unregulated substances circulating in the community.

3. Decriminalisation, Legalisation, and Regulation

SSDP Australia supports the full decriminalisation of drug use, advocating for the removal of all criminal penalties for personal possession. This approach recognizes that substance use is a public health issue rather than a criminal one. Decriminalisation efforts should go beyond diversionary models and focus on eliminating police discretion to ensure fairness, particularly for marginalised communities. Additionally, there is growing support for the legalisation and responsible regulation of currently illicit substances, aligning policy with public health and social welfare goals. The NSW Government is urged to engage in evidence-based reforms that prioritise the health and human rights of people who use drugs, with meaningful involvement from young people and communities in the decision-making process.

Sincerely,

Students for Sensible Drug Policy club at Western Sydney University