

What does the research evidence tell us about what Australians think about the legal status of drugs? A 2018 update

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Introduction

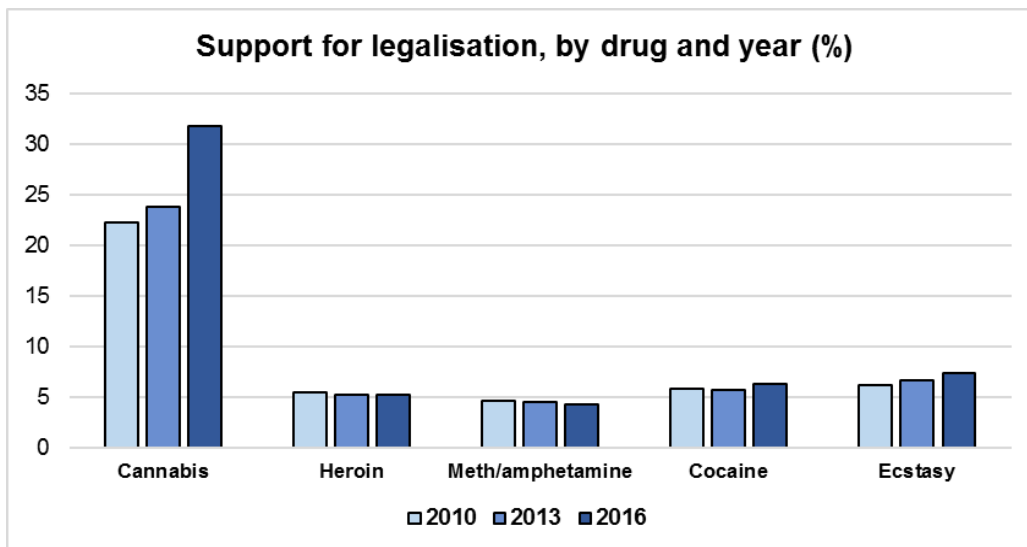
This bulletin summarises data from a nationally representative survey of Australians (The National Drug Strategy Household Survey) which asks people their opinions about the legal status of drug in 2016. ¹ We differentiate what Australians think about “legalisation” versus “decriminalisation” for four different types of drugs (cannabis, ecstasy, heroin and meth/amphetamine) across three survey years: 2010, 2013 and 2016. We also explore how the Australian public think money should be directed in responding to illicit drugs.

Key messages

- Support for decriminalisation and legalisation has grown in Australian between 2010 and 2016, particularly for cannabis
- As of 2016 there is strong public support amongst Australians for decriminalisation of possession for personal use of all illicit drugs: 50-78% support such actions
- Echoing this trend there has been growing public support to invest in treatment and education not law enforcement
- Similar trends are observed in most parts of Australia.

Legalisation of drugs for recreational purposes

Respondents were asked “to what extent would you support or oppose the personal use of the following drugs being made legal?” (the same question in 2010, 2013 and 2016). The figure below shows support for legalisation of cannabis for recreational purposes increased in 2016, but not for other drugs. As of 2016, 31.8% of Australians support this approach with less than 10% supporting the legalisation of other illicit drugs.



Note: “Don’t know enough to say” responses were between 6.2% and 8.2%.

¹ These data are re-analyses of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s National Drug Strategy Household Survey. In 2016, the total sample size was 23,772. The survey uses a multistage, stratified area random sample design. Data have been weighted to represent the Australian population. The numbers of respondents who said “don’t know” is given below the relevant graph, and the percentages reported in text represent 100% of respondents. Results may thus differ to that reported elsewhere.

Decriminalisation 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?” respondents selected from a range of responses:

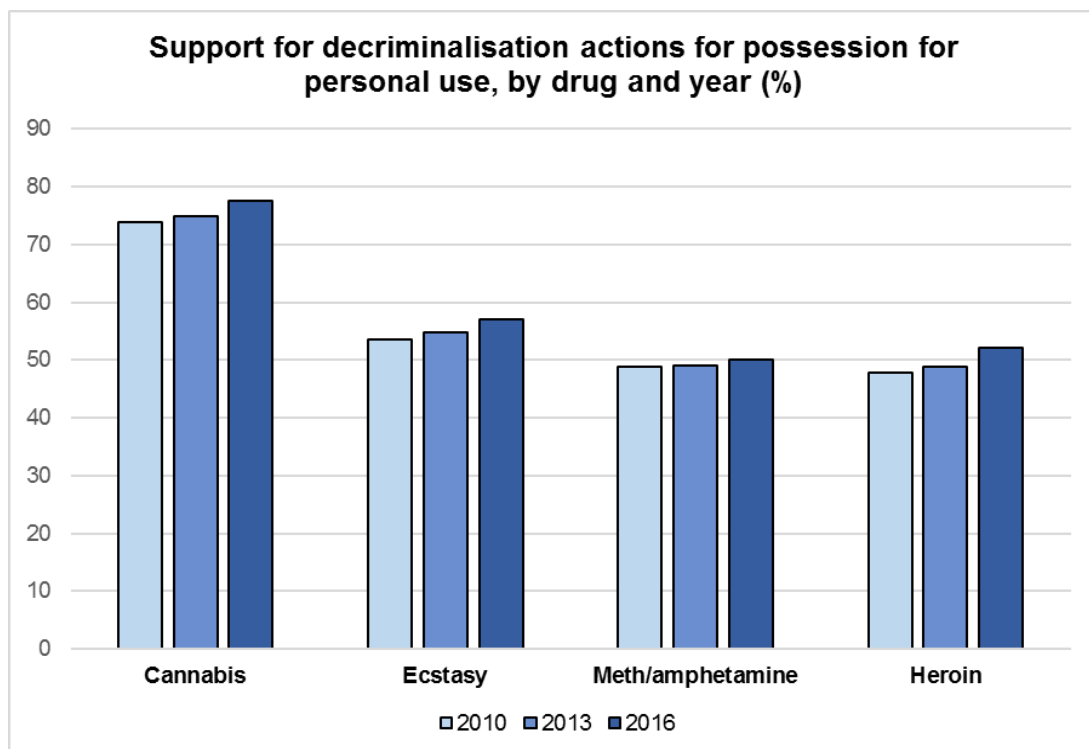
Decriminalisation actions include: no action; caution/warning; referral to education; referral to treatment; and small fine (\$200).

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

The figure below shows what Australians think about decriminalisation actions for each drug from 2010 to 2016.

It shows:

- Small increases in support for decriminalisation particularly for cannabis and ecstasy
- As of 2016, 77.5% of Australians support decriminalisation actions for cannabis use ²
- 57% of all Australians support decriminalisation actions for ecstasy use
- 50% and 52% of Australians support decriminalisation actions for meth/amphetamine use and heroin use respectively



Note: 4% to 5.3% of respondents said they “don’t know enough to say” for cannabis. Between 4% and 7% of respondents said they “don’t know enough to say” for the other drugs.

² The increase in support for decriminalisation is further exemplified in another question asked for cannabis alone: “Do you think possession of small quantities of Marijuana/Cannabis for personal use should be a criminal offence, that is, should offenders get a criminal record?” Support for criminal penalties for cannabis reduced from 28.5% in 2010 to 21.3% in 2017.

The preferred type of decriminalisation response differed by drug:

- Most Australian's preferred no action/caution/civil penalty for possession of cannabis
- Most Australian's preferred referral to education and treatment for possession of meth/amphetamine or heroin

Preferred type of decriminalisation response, 2016, by drug

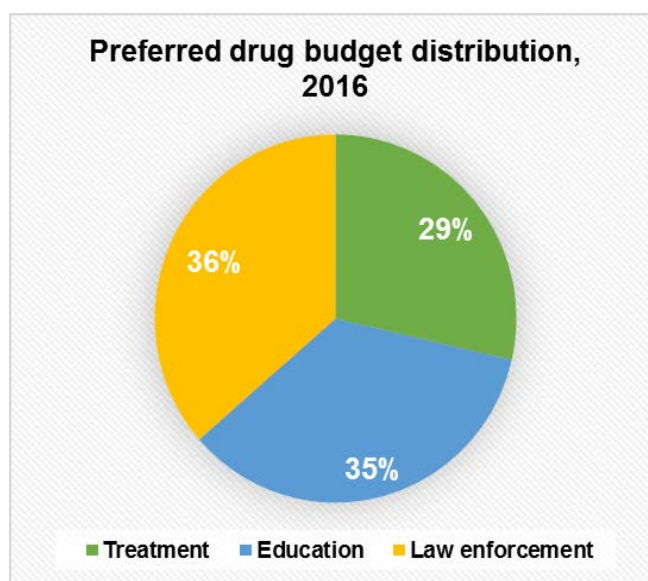
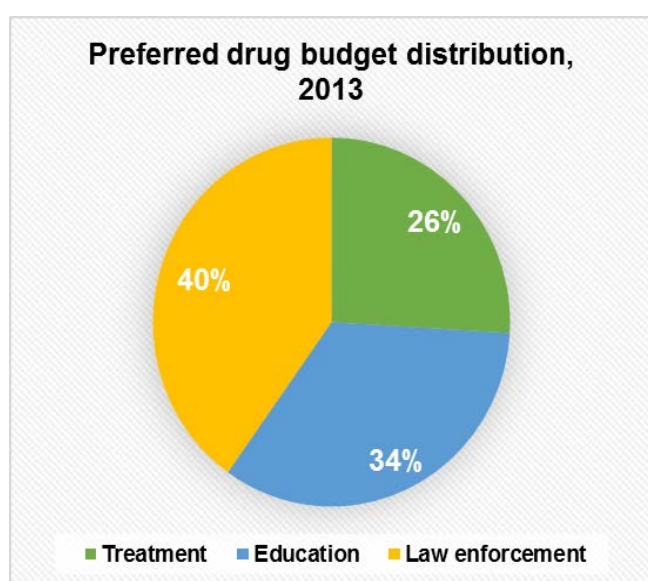
	Cannabis	Ecstasy	Meth/amphetamine	Heroin
No action / caution / civil penalty	51.4%	19.8%	6.4%	6.1%
Referral to drug education / treatment	26.1%	37.3%	43.6%	46.1%

Perceptions on the Australian drug budget: preferred distribution of spending

Respondents were asked "If you were given \$100 to spend on reducing illicit drug use, how much would you allocate to each of these areas (across three pillars of education, treatment and law enforcement)?" The figures show how Australians want resources allocated in 2013 and 2016.

This shows:

- Small shifts in resource allocation away from law enforcement towards investment in drug education and treatment
- As of 2016 Australians want 64% drug budget resources allocated to drug education and treatment
- Such views appear increasingly divergent with how Australian drug budgets are being directed ³



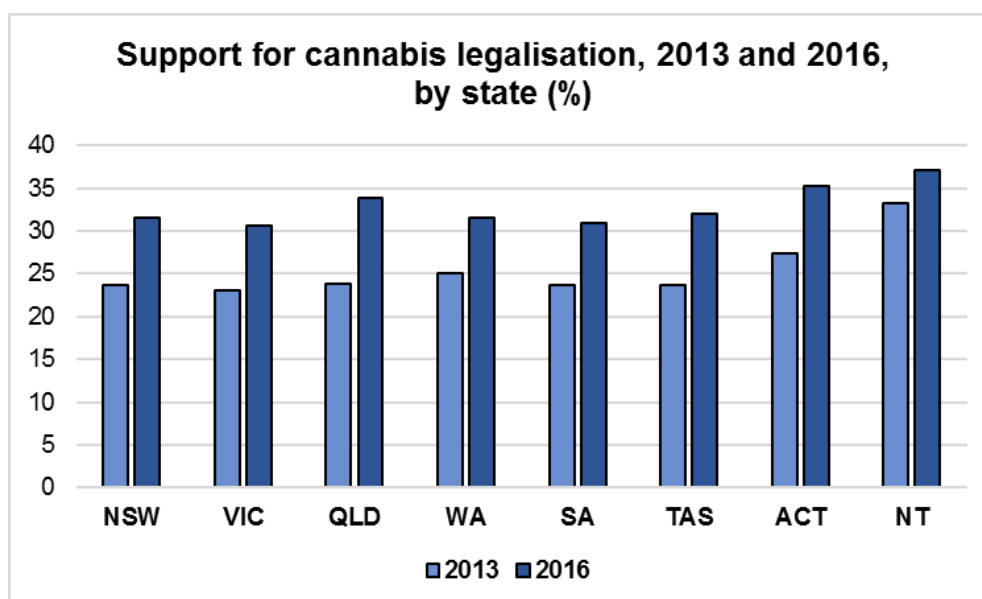
³ The most recent Australian drug budget estimate showed 66% expenditure was directed at law enforcement: Ritter, A., McLeod, R., & Shanahan, M. (2013). *Government drug policy expenditure in Australia-2009/10*. Sydney: NDARC.

Are there state and territory differences in attitudes to the legal status of drugs?

Attitudes to policy often differ across Australia. Here we compare attitudes to legalisation and decriminalisation by state.

This shows:

- Despite differences in the proportions of people supporting legalisation and decriminalisation in each state/territory, there are increasingly similar trends
- Between 2013 and 2016 support for legalisation of cannabis increased in all states



- There was also an increase in support for decriminalisation of cannabis, ecstasy and heroin use in all states, except in the Northern Territory and Tasmania

Support for cannabis decriminalisation, 2013 and 2016, by state (%)

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
2013	72.3	73.8	74.1	75.5	73.9	78.4	78.7	75.3
2016	75.8	75.8	76.9	77.9	77.7	78.6	82.5	73.6

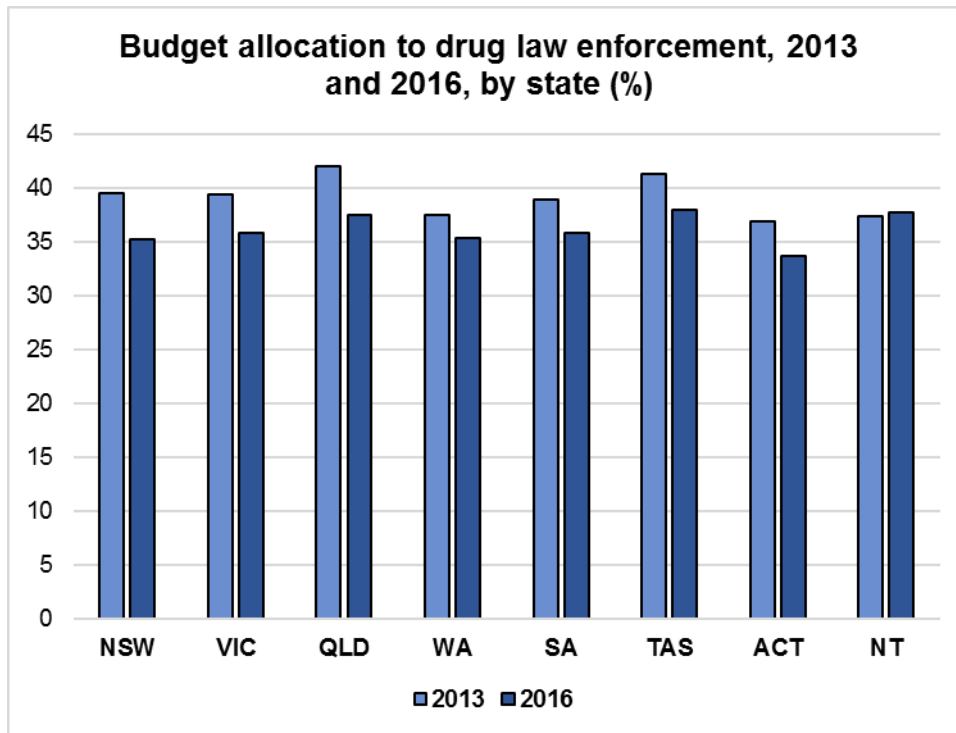
Support for ecstasy decriminalisation, 2013 and 2016, by state (%)

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
2013	52.3	55.1	51.1	53.3	50.8	57.0	56.9	53.7
2016	55.8	57.5	53.5	56.7	55.3	57.0	60.0	52.0

Support for heroin decriminalisation, 2013 and 2016, by state (%)

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
2013	46.7	49.3	44.4	45.1	44.9	52.9	51.7	47.4
2016	50.8	52.2	48.0	49.1	50.3	52.6	56.1	47.7

- Finally, from 2013 to 2016, respondents in all states except the Northern Territory, reported they would shift how the Australian drug budget is directed: reducing investment in drug law enforcement and increasing investment in drug education and drug treatment.



The correct citation for this publication is: Hughes, C. & Ritter, A. (2018). Bulletin No. 25: What does the research evidence tell us about what Australians think about the legal status of drugs? A 2018 update. *DPMP Bulletin Series*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and Social Policy Research Centre.

Acknowledgements: We thank the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) for providing access to the National Drug Strategy Household Survey data.