



VICTORIA POLICE

PREVENT DISRUPT CONNECT CARE

DRUG STRATEGY
2020–2025





Message from the Deputy Commissioner



Every day of every week police see the harm drugs cause in the community. Harm from the violence committed by someone high on drugs, and the burglaries, thefts and other crimes committed to support an addiction. There are also the drug-related road trauma, family violence and sexual assaults. We see individuals' physical and mental health deteriorate, including psychotic episodes and overdoses, and the impact this has on their families. And there is the violence between rival drug syndicates and gangs who seek to control drug markets and profit from their drug dealing.

Victoria Police, however, remains unwavering in its commitment to minimising the devastating impact of drugs in the Victorian community. We know that this is a complex problem with many facets. That's why we are undertaking to deepen our understanding of the areas of most harm and the most effective role Victoria Police can play in reducing that harm.

The purpose of this strategy is to articulate our approach so that all Victoria Police employees, our partners, and the Victorian community understand what we will do. We will continue to arrest and prosecute drug dealers and disrupt and dismantle drug networks. At the same time, we will work side-by-side with the community and our partners. Together, we will adopt compassionate and targeted responses based on

evidence of what works to prevent harm, support change, and connect people to treatment and support when they need it.

Our objective is improved health and community safety for all Victorians. To realise this, we will modernise how we work across the organisation. We will need to be open to different ways of working and be clear on our expectations of ourselves in tackling this enormously complex challenge. We will continue the important and high-quality work we already do with our crime agency partners in reducing the supply of drugs into Victoria. We will also identify new ways to dismantle drug networks and supply chains, and increase seizures of assets and proceeds of crime.

We will do everything we can to prevent these networks from profiting from the misery of others.

Bringing Victoria Police's best response to the issue of drugs will require us to take a collective and accountable approach. We will develop a detailed action plan so that all Victoria Police employees can see their role in implementing this strategy, and we will update it annually. We will review our performance frameworks, reform our tasking and coordination processes, and develop increased capability across the entire organisation. We can and will do more to prevent drug use, reduce supply, and reduce the harm from drugs, which is what our community expects of us.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RICK NUGENT



The **environment** we operate in

Drugs create a complex problem that knows no borders, ignores ethnicity and socio-economic status, is insidious in its nature, and infiltrates society in ways that are damaging and painful. It is a problem we cannot tackle on our own. We will continue to work with our state, Commonwealth, and other law enforcement partners and build on the National Drug Strategy to evolve our approach to the changing drug environment.

We will continue to focus on reducing harm and supply through seizing drugs, disrupting drug markets, and arresting and prosecuting drug dealers. These remain priorities, but we also recognise that the drug market, modes of distribution, patterns of drug use and types of drugs we're dealing with are constantly changing.

We need to maintain a contemporary approach that reflects the complex nature of drugs in our community.

THE WAY POLICE ARE TACKLING DRUGS IS CHANGING

Traditional approaches to policing drugs have been grounded in enforcement activity. This has involved attempts to reduce the production and supply of drugs, divert drug users from the justice system, treat people with drug addiction, and reduce demand in drug markets. These approaches are still sound, but research into drug markets and consumer behaviour has led to the emergence of innovative approaches.

These include:

- supporting health-led prevention-first approaches to tackling drug harms and treatment-based responses to use and possession
- disrupting drug markets and looking beyond arrest-and-seizure performance measures to break down organised crime networks
- supporting education, community resilience and early interventions
- focusing police efforts on drugs that are causing the most harm
- identifying individuals with unexplained wealth and confiscating their assets, using highly developed asset confiscation capabilities.

Our Partners



- The Victorian Government
- The Commonwealth Government and agencies
- Agencies in other states and territories
- International law enforcement partners
- Health agencies
- Other government partners
- Industry
- Communities
- Support services

EVOLUTION

CHALLENGE

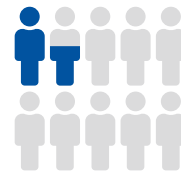
The **complex problem** of drugs

Victoria has experienced a significant rise in methamphetamine use but it is not the only drug causing community harm. We are also seeing the re-emergence of deadly heroin overdoses, a rise in poly-drug use, and drug use by people of different ages not seen before. Emerging drug trends include synthetic substances and illicitly distributed prescription drugs.

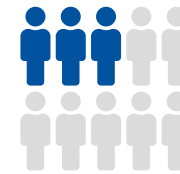
At the same time, criminals operating in the Australian illicit drug market have developed more sophisticated techniques for drug trafficking and accessing consumers.

DRUG USE IN VICTORIA IS ON THE RISE

Illicit drug use in Victoria has been increasing since 2007. While people in their twenties continue to be the most likely age group to use illicit drugs, older people are increasingly likely to be drug users. What is clear is that drugs and other crime are interrelated, the prevalence of drugs within our community is frightening, and the focus on drug crime must be elevated.



17% of Victorians
AGED 14 AND OLDER
recently used
illicit drugs
IN 2019, UP FROM 13.7% IN 2010¹



30.7% of Victorians
AGED 20-29
recently used
illicit drugs
IN 2019, UP FROM 26% IN 2010²

Across Australia, there have been **notable increases** in drug use in:



PEOPLE AGED 40 AND OVER³





Cannabis

is the most **commonly used illicit drug** by Victorians⁴

Of those who use drugs on a weekly basis,

methamphetamine (including ice)

was the **second most commonly used drug** in Victoria⁵

Proportionally, Australia has one of the **highest rates of methamphetamine use** across the world⁸



Victoria has the highest rate of **heroin use**

of any state across Australia and this is **concentrated in metropolitan areas**¹⁰

“Our approach to drug crime and drug use has to be multi-pronged and we have to work with our existing and new partners to achieve a system response. We can’t achieve it on our own.”

METROPOLITAN SUPERINTENDENT

Analysis of wastewater shows that

- cocaine and heroin use is **higher in Melbourne** compared to regional areas in Victoria
- methamphetamine (especially ice), oxycodone, fentanyl and MDMA use is **higher in regional areas**⁶

Recent cocaine use

in Australia is at the **highest rate in 18 years**⁷

OVER **700**



new psychoactive substances

were recorded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime¹¹



4.5%

of the Victorian population has recently

MISUSED PHARMACEUTICALS⁹



THE DRUG MARKET IS BECOMING MORE HARMFUL, MORE SOPHISTICATED, MORE INTERCONNECTED AND MORE COMPLEX

Australia is a wealthy nation with significant demand for illicit drugs and a broad network of distribution. Along with changing modes of trafficking and manufacturing, distribution networks are leveraging digital platforms to target vulnerable citizens. Encrypted networks and cryptocurrencies are facilitating illicit transactions and creating new challenges in tracing criminal activity.¹²

We must work to make it as difficult as possible for drug dealers to exploit the vulnerable in our community by harnessing our partnerships, leveraging expertise and trialling innovative approaches. We must create a hostile environment for them so they do not succeed.

“Drug dealers wreak havoc in our community—ruining lives and accumulating wealth off the misery of others.”

CRIME COMMAND
DETECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT



11% were for
**DRUG-RELATED
CHEMICALS**

48% were for
ILLICIT DRUGS

The darknet is an encrypted network of websites that are not accessible without specific software or authorisations.

74% of people using amphetamine type substances
**BOUGHT THEIR DRUGS
OFF SOCIAL NETWORKING
APPLICATIONS¹⁴**



Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (ERDS) is an illicit drug monitoring system that consists of interviews with people who regularly use ecstasy and other stimulants.

Drugs are creating enormous harm to our fellow Victorians

Illicit drug use and drug crime cause significant harm—to the health of individuals who use drugs, to their families who face the dangers of increased violence, and to people in the broader community who are victims of associated crime and violence. Drugs are tearing at the economic and social fabric of communities and this can be particularly hard felt in regional areas.

HARM TO THE COMMUNITY

Violence and threats of violence, are frequent among people involved in the illicit drug trade. For example, organised criminals use firearms to control their assets and market share. This violence can spill over into our community, including our streets, cafes and pubs.

Clandestine laboratories and the operations surrounding them are often financed by organised crime syndicates, which are protected through intimidation and violence. Illegal tampering with the electricity supply to cannabis crop houses presents fire and electrocution risks.

The whole community suffers when a drug user inflicts harm on others from their poor decision making and drug-fuelled behaviours. Drug use contributes to drug driving, drug-fuelled assaults, and is a major driver of burglary, robbery and theft.

Over 25 per cent of fatalities in Victoria in one year involved drivers/motorcyclists who tested positive for drugs¹⁵



One in ten surveyed Australians reported being a victim of a drug-related incident¹⁶

THE COST OF DRUG USE TO SOCIETY

The most recent estimate is that illicit drug use costs Australia \$8.2 billion a year. This economic burden includes:

- the cost of law enforcement and criminal justice, including policing, courts, and prisons
- the health costs associated with the management of illness, including mental illness, injury and disease
- social rehabilitation
- lost income and production from drug addiction treatment, imprisonment, and drug-related death.

The most recent estimate of the costs associated with illicit drug use in Australia is

\$8.2 billion¹⁷





“Drug addiction is often the tip of the iceberg that is used to mask the real issue. Being drug affected also makes people an easy target for theft, assault and robbery. My role is to ensure they are all safe.”

GENERAL DUTIES SENIOR CONSTABLE

HARM TO THE INDIVIDUAL

The most serious and direct harms from drug use are to the individual. These include drug-induced psychosis, chronic disease, cognitive impairment, and, sadly, too many deaths.

Individuals who use drugs are more likely to experience impaired relationships, blood-borne diseases, lower levels of education, problem gambling and long-term involvement with the criminal justice system. Some will face ongoing unemployment and lose their homes. Almost all will engage in risk-taking behaviours.

Drug overdoses continue to rise in Victoria, as demonstrated by climbing rates over the last decade.

Unintentional overdose deaths in Victoria **increased 69.7%** IN 10 YEARS¹⁸

Over half (59%) of all unintentional overdose deaths involve multiple drugs¹⁹



Around **79% of hepatitis C infection notifications** report injecting drug use²⁰



392 Victorians died from unintentional overdoses of illicit drugs in one year²¹

COMPARED TO 259 WHO DIED ON VICTORIA'S ROADS²²



HARM TO THE FAMILY

Drug addiction puts huge pressure on the family and friends of drug users, leads to damaged relationships and fuels family violence. It increases the likelihood of families experiencing mental health problems and being involved in drug driving accidents. It decreases their economic stability by reducing savings and forcing families into situations where they need to sell their possessions. The risks of violence from outside the family can escalate, often through drug dealers enforcing unsettled debts.

The significant financial burden and emotional anguish from losing trust in a loved one can have a lasting effect on the entire family and close friends.

Drug involvement is reported in **a third of family incident reports**

IN VICTORIA²⁶



40,000 people access Victoria's drug and alcohol treatment support services

EACH YEAR²³

Around 43% of Melbourne's homeless population

reported pre-existing alcohol or other drug problems²⁴

Well over half of the Victorian sample (62%) self-reported that they had experienced a **mental health problem**

IN THE PREVIOUS 6 MONTHS²⁵

“Drugs cause financial and emotional distress in families and it's the elderly and children who are the most vulnerable when their loved ones use drugs.”

REGIONAL SERGEANT





Our **integrated** strategy

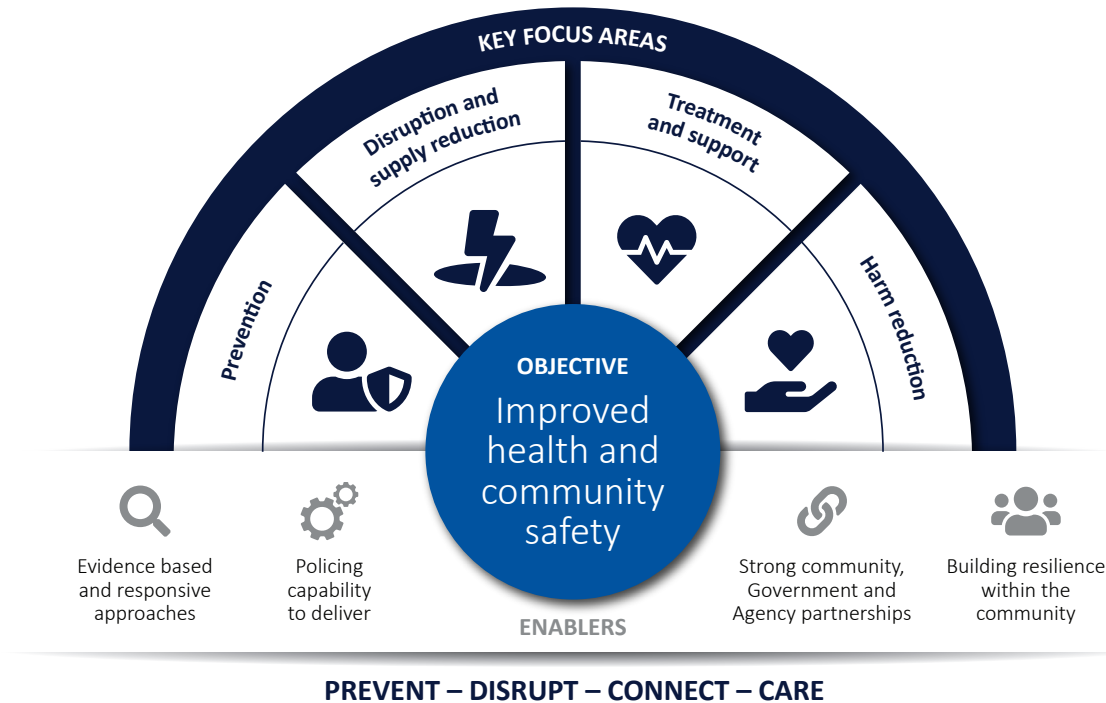
FOCUS

Four integrated focus areas will guide how we work across our organisation, with our partners and with the community over the next five years.

We recognise that Victoria Police has an important role to play in:

- **preventing** drugs from coming into our communities, and preventing increases in demand
- **disrupting** and reducing the supply of drugs
- **connecting** people who need help into treatment by diverting and referring them to services that support them to recover and be active members of society
- showing that we **care** by supporting harm-reduction strategies that keep Victorians safe and alive.

Four key enablers will support us to achieve our objective of improved health and community safety.





PREVENT

Prevention

Preventing drug harm before it occurs is one of the most effective mechanisms for supporting a safer and healthier Victoria.

Stopping and delaying the uptake of drug use and reducing the consumption of drugs are vital components of prevention.

Victoria Police will build a proactive, community-based approach to prevention which emphasises the importance of education, partnerships and building resilience in our communities.

OUR ROLE

Victoria Police understands that our role in prevention is far reaching, but we also know that prevention is a shared responsibility. We will strengthen the relationships with our departmental and non-government organisation partners and develop new connections in the community to embed an approach to prevention that is specific to the local needs and harms.

Education and social programs are important to reduce the stigma that prevents voluntary participation in or access to services and support. Police can work with communities to deliver education and build awareness of the raft of drug prevention programs available. Local drug action teams in many Victorian police service areas are an example of how this can be achieved by collaborating with other agencies and community groups.

“Effective prevention action will help us avoid a crisis-driven response. A joined-up co-delivery model that engages with people in proactive ways across police and other agencies like health and education, will stop drug use before it escalates and will prevent people from becoming entrenched in criminal networks.”

METROPOLITAN
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

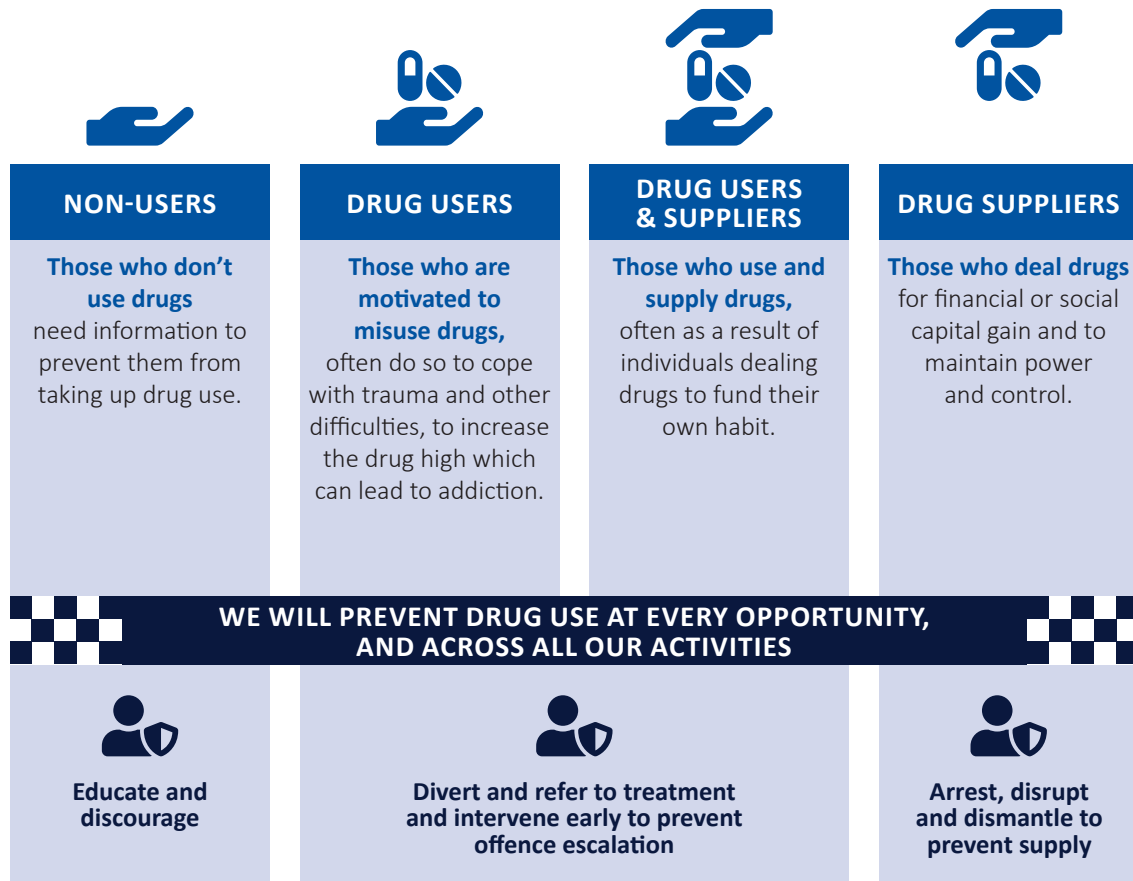
Building on our best work: bringing the community together

When the people in a Victorian regional centre realised they had an escalating problem with methamphetamines, they felt they had no one to turn to. Even police were taken aback at the prevalence of such a serious drug in a regional area. Police had disrupted a violent drug syndicate but the problem persisted. The Divisional Superintendent made it their business to get to know the local community, local representatives from government departments, treatment providers, youth workers and others. Through police leadership, a family support group of

despairing parents and friends grew into a multi-agency committee with the resources to provide education, care and support. This holistic approach increased trust in police, making people more willing to report information. Investigation teams uncovered a new drug syndicate that had recruited dealers who had worked with and learned from the disrupted former syndicate.

When we work collectively with our local partners, we can build community resilience in the face of a significant problem.

OUR COMMITMENT TO PREVENTING DRUG-RELATED HARM:



WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

- ✓ Police are improving community understanding of harmful drug use and the effects of drug use, for example the impact of drugs on our roads.
- ✓ Police are working collaboratively with the community to reduce drug harm and identify signs of risk.
- ✓ Through effective disruption and creating hostile environments for drug traffickers, police are preventing access to drugs.

STRENGTHENING OUR PARTNERSHIPS WITH:



- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Justice and Community Safety
- Department of Education and Training
- Members of our community
- Community organisations and non-government organisations
- Local government
- Local community groups
- Treatment providers
- Youth workers





DISRUPT

Disruption and supply reduction

Victoria Police prioritises stopping the entry of illicit drugs and precursor chemicals and shutting down local manufacturing. We do this through law enforcement operations and disrupting the drug market by creating a hostile environment for traffickers, cultivators and manufacturers.

Successful investigations use intelligence gained through external law enforcement partners and members of the public to inform targeted operations into organised drug crime.

Our drug policing framework views the market as an interrelated network of three overlapping tiers depicting drug dealer and drug user activity. By leveraging our partner network, our approach to disruption will be intelligence-led, embedded within our processes, and coordinated across Victoria Police. We must target our efforts to where the most harm is occurring and to the drugs causing the most harm.

Building on our best work: disrupting and dismantling violent drug syndicates

Through a localised police operation, Victoria Police targeted violent offenders responsible for several aggravated burglaries at cannabis crop houses. As a result of the investigation, scores of offenders were arrested. The seizure included a large number of firearms (including a machine gun and assault rifle), several kilograms of illicit drugs, a heroin press and over a million dollars of alleged tainted property.

Number of drug seizures in Victoria

6,332

A total amount seized of 3419.35 kilograms²⁷



OUR ROLE

Victoria Police will continue our focus on targeted investigations into serious and organised crime, through strategic state, Commonwealth, national, and international partnerships. We will also target local-level mid-tier drug crime to disrupt and dismantle drug dealers' networks. We will seize their assets and property, dismantle their networks and reduce their social standing. We will not let them succeed.

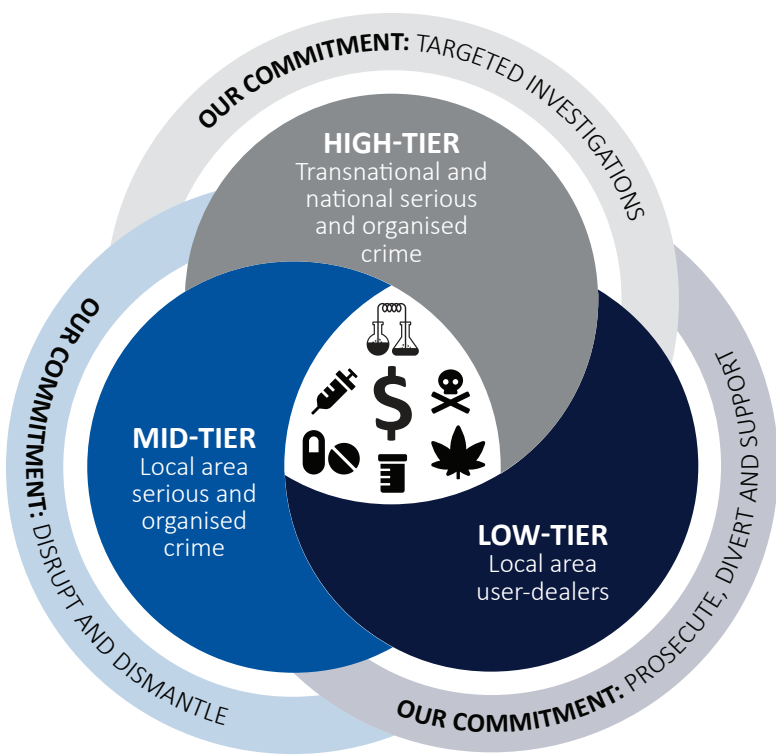
We will deter low-level drug dealers from moving into escalating levels of drug trafficking or violence by adopting contemporary policing practices, such as diverting drug users into treatment and supporting their recovery.

The Australian Institute of Criminology estimates the cost of serious and organised crime to Australia to be

AU\$47.4 billion

This figure includes \$15.9 billion for the cost of prevention and response²⁸





WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

- ✓ All tiers of the drug market are being effectively disrupted.
- ✓ Police have created a hostile environment for local drug production and supply.
- ✓ Illicit drugs are being seized and prevented from entering Victoria.
- ✓ Disruption practices are embedded in our operations, coordinated across the organisation and targeted towards the greatest harms.

STRENGTHENING OUR PARTNERSHIPS WITH:



- Australian Federal Police
- Australian Border Force
- Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission
- Department of Justice and Community Safety
- Members of the public contributing to investigations
- Corrections and providers of treatment programs
- Local government
- Local community groups

“We will disrupt and dismantle the networks that drug dealers rely on. We will continue to seize large quantities of drugs and dismantle the economic viability and social connections drug distributors have in the community.”

CRIME COMMAND DETECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT





CONNECT

Treatment and support

Evidence-informed treatment and support reduces the misuse of illicit drugs and supports people to recover from dependence.

Treatment programs and support services are shown to be highly effective in reducing harmful drug use and related problems.

While there is clear recognition that treatment should be a health response, Victoria Police has a role to play in ensuring new and existing programs are supported by our policing approach.

Victoria Police has a longstanding drug diversion program, which serves to direct individuals in possession of a small quantity of illicit drugs into treatment rather than into the criminal

justice system. We recognise the benefit of this program in reducing drug use and recidivism. Our work with the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services and the treatment sector have ensured the longevity and success of the program.

We also recognise that not everyone who comes into contact with police and who needs treatment is able to receive it, including people who are charged with other offences. We need to continue to trial different ways of referring more people who need help, and work with their families and support organisations to assist them in the journey out of addiction.

Drug users could be our children, members of our family, our friends or people who have lost their way. When we see the human, we will see the way forward.

“There is a significant number of people that have lost the capacity to choose, and it’s been taken away from them because of drugs. We need to help them get better and be able to choose again.”

REGIONAL SENIOR SERGEANT

Treatment is cost effective and prevents far more expensive justice and acute health demand and costs. There is up to an \$8 return on investment for each \$1 spent on alcohol and other drug treatment.²⁹

Building on our best work: trialling new approaches to treatment and support

Police in Melbourne’s Southern Metro Region and their partners at the local children’s court are trialling an innovative approach to supporting young drug users. The Youth Accelerated Justice Outcome (YAJO) project has reduced the time between a young person being admitted to bail at the court and their first mention date from up to several months to within seven days. The benefits for young people include earlier referrals to support services, the ability to participate in case conferencing, and timelier case determination. In the longer-term, we hope to see this contribute to reducing recidivism.

OUR ROLE

Victoria Police can play a key role in promoting treatment and support by:

- supporting public education and awareness about the need to treat drug addiction as a health issue and drug distribution as a law enforcement issue
- using early referral of individuals into treatment programs to prevent drug users from becoming user-dealers
- identifying and recording drug-related incidents to enable accurate reporting and help manage referrals into treatment
- facilitating treatment-service planning and implementation between levels of government
- increasing training around drug misuse and overdose.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

- ✓ An increased and expanded Victoria Police drug diversion program.
- ✓ Using police discretion for diversion as the regulatory mechanism to ensure that personal drug use is treated as a health issue.
- ✓ Increase utilisation of treatment services by creating and supporting integrated referral pathways to treatment services.
- ✓ Treatment and referral outcomes are being communicated back to Victoria Police.

STRENGTHENING OUR PARTNERSHIPS WITH:



- Department of Health and Human Services
- Members of our communities
- Treatment providers
- Social support services
- Department of Justice and Community Safety
- Department of Education and Training



Offenders who receive the Victoria Police Drug Diversion Program are

10% less likely to reoffend³⁰





CARE

Harm reduction

Harm is the adverse health, social and economic consequence of drug use. The objective of harm reduction is to care for those using drugs by reducing the risks associated with drug use and encouraging safer behaviours through safer settings.

Victoria Police works to implement government policies that reduce harm to individuals and ultimately, keep people alive.



THE NEEDLE AND SYRINGE PROGRAM

The needle and syringe program (NSP) has been an integral component of Australia's harm reduction approach to illicit drug use since its inception in 1986. It is considered to be one of the most effective harm reduction initiatives in Australia. The NSP is a prime example of a health based response that is compassionate, evidence based and has resulted in few, if any, unintended consequences. Victoria Police has supported needle exchange programs since 1988.



SUPERVISED INJECTING ROOMS

In 2018, Victoria implemented a medically supervised injecting room trial, to provide a safe, hygienic place for injecting drugs of dependence in a supervised health setting. The objective is to reduce overdoses and deaths, reduce incidence of public injecting and reduce the number of discarded needles and syringes in public spaces. The injecting room also provides a gateway to access other health and social support. Victoria Police supports the trial and contributes to the initiative's objectives.

OUR ROLE

Victoria Police recognises that drug problems are first and foremost health issues. By taking a health-focused approach, police are empowered to respond to an individual's circumstances, environment and life stage. This enables policing approaches that reduce harm and keep the community safe.

“Every death on the road is a failure; every drug death should be seen as a failure too.”

METROPOLITAN ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER



“It’s easy for police to see all drug users as criminals and no doubt about it, enforcing drug crime is our role. But when I go to a house associated with drugs and I see a young innocent child there, it reminds me that people who use drugs can also be mums and dads and have others who depend on them. That’s a pretty good reason to do whatever we can to help them. That’s how I like to think of our role in harm reduction.”

REGIONAL INSPECTOR

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

- ✓ Observable person-centred behaviours such as compassion and empathy towards drug users and their families to connect them to appropriate health-led responses.
- ✓ Identifying harm being caused by a drug or by the violence associated with a drug in a region, and tasking police activities according to the highest value harm-reduction outcome.
- ✓ Enforcing the law, keeping people safe, and preventing reoffending by adopting approaches to best suit the circumstances of each drug crime.

STRENGTHENING OUR PARTNERSHIPS WITH:



- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Justice and Community Safety
- Industry, for example, Live Music Roundtable partners
- Social support agencies
- Local community groups



ENABLE

Our approach to curtailing the drug problem must continually evolve in response to drug use trends, the increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for drug trafficking and production, and a technology-enabled market. To succeed, we must build the evidence base so we know that what we are doing is making a difference.

Partnerships are essential to preventing harm, disrupting drug syndicates and supply chains, connecting drug addicted people to integrated treatment and building community resilience. We want to openly share information, debrief on learnings, inform each other of outcomes, and listen to each other's perspectives.

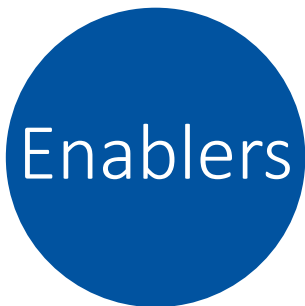
Further developing our working relationships with law enforcement, health, and other government and community partners is one way we will more effectively disrupt serious drug crime and take a more person-centred and health-led approach to drug users.



EVIDENCE BASED AND RESPONSIVE APPROACHES



POLICING CAPABILITY TO DELIVER



Enablers



STRONG COMMUNITY, GOVERNMENT AND AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS



BUILDING RESILIENCE WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

We recognise the need for greater organisational alignment and a more coordinated approach to drug policing. This includes interpreting data, improving intelligence sharing and more appropriate drug-related performance measures. We will introduce higher-level investigative capability in drug teams, ensure we have them in the right places, and support them through the development of a disruption toolkit and clear Command-level direction.

We will model and encourage behaviours that support referral into treatment. This means increasing expectations around compassion and empathy towards individuals who use drugs and their families.

The ability of communities to effectively deal with and bounce back from challenges is what is known as community resilience. This is a critical factor in preventing individual, family and community harm. Victoria Police has a role to play in helping to build resilience in communities across Victoria.

Endnotes

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VICTORIA POLICE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Victoria Police pays our respect to the traditional owners of lands on which we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who continue to care for their country, culture and people.

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