

# Hep C factsheets

## Harm minimisation



### Introduction

**Why is minimising the harmful effects of drugs the main goal of the National Drug Strategy?**

**How does harm minimisation fit in with traditional drug law enforcement?**

**How can police reduce the crime associated with drug use?**

**Why is police support for needle exchange and methadone units part of harm minimisation?**

### Introduction

Harm minimisation aims to reduce the harmful health, social and economic consequences of alcohol and other drugs, both for people who use drugs and for the wider community.

For people who continue to use drugs, harm minimisation strategies seek to make the drug use safer. Harm minimisation recognises that while total abstinence from illicit drug use is the most desirable option, some people continue to use drugs - so it's necessary to also minimise the harm drugs can cause.

### Why is minimising the harmful effects of drugs the main goal of the National Drug Strategy?

Alcohol and drug use problems in Australia are estimated to cost more than \$18 billion a year. This includes health care, loss of work productivity and law enforcement costs associated with alcohol-related road crashes and illicit drugs. Added to this are the dreadful consequences of family breakdown, crime, absenteeism, pain, suffering and death.

Harm minimisation is an essential public health measure. Unsafe drug injecting has been identified as one of the main risk behaviours for transmitting hep C and HIV.

Since the introduction of Needle & Syringe Programs (NSPs), the number of diagnosed cases of HIV among people who inject drugs has not increased and Australia now has one of the lowest rates of HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users in the world. Similarly, NSPs are believed to be helping cap the alarming rate of hep C infection among people who inject. Support for programs which promote the health and safety of the community is an important part of drug law enforcement.

### How does harm minimisation fit in with traditional drug law enforcement?

Drug law enforcement still concentrates on reducing the supply of illicit drugs available, in the hope that people will not take up or continue to use these drugs. Non-use is called abstinence. However, research has now shown that the American-style "war on drugs" approach of the past has not achieved intended results.

The broader strategies of harm minimisation embrace many new areas such as police support for health protection measures, eg. Needle & Syringe Programs and Methadone Programs. Police Service Community Drug Education training courses are aimed at preventing the demand for drugs.

Harm minimisation extends the range of traditional law enforcement and is achieving good results. For example, it has helped reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

## **How can police reduce the crime associated with drug use?**

Rigorous police strategies are still in place to reduce the violence and crime associated with manufacturing, trafficking and dealing in illicit drugs.

Increasing the number of chronic drug users who receive methadone treatment reduces their need for costly street drugs and therefore reduces property crime and crimes against the person. For some former illicit drug users, abstinence can be an important part of this approach.

## **Why is police support for NSP and methadone units part of harm minimisation?**

Because NSPs encourage safer health practices which have resulted in helping cap the incidence of hep C and HIV; and methadone treatment means less crime in the long term because of a reduced need for illicit drugs.

- This factsheet was developed by the Hepatitis C Council of NSW, assisted by the Drug Programs Co-ordination Unit, NSW Police Service.