

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## A caution can save a life:

### HRA backs expansion of cannabis cautioning, but says legal reform still needed

Harm Reduction Australia (HRA) welcomes moves to expand access to cannabis cautioning in Victoria but says the reform should be understood as an important harm reduction measure, not a substitute for broader cannabis law reform.

While HRA supports the legalisation of cannabis, we believe that, in the absence of legal reform, expanding access to cannabis cautioning is a practical step that can reduce unnecessary harm and keep people out of the criminal legal system for minor possession offences.

Importantly, this is not a new cannabis cautioning system. Victoria has had a cannabis cautioning scheme since 1998, with changes made in 2024 to expand police use of cautions for minor cannabis possession. However, there has been little public awareness of these changes, raising important questions about why such a significant policy shift has occurred with so little public communication.

Approximately 4,000 Victorians are arrested each year for cannabis possession, despite evidence that criminal penalties for minor drug offences can create long-term harms that far outweigh the risks associated with low-level cannabis use itself. Criminal records can affect employment, housing, education, parenting, and future engagement with health services.

*“Cannabis cautioning is a practical harm reduction measure that prioritises education, early support, and community wellbeing over unnecessarily criminalising people for minor possession offences,”* said Dr Annie Madden AO, Executive Director of Harm Reduction Australia.

*“However, we also want to be clear: cautioning systems based primarily on police discretion are not the best way to respond to personal cannabis use in the community. They can be applied inconsistently and may reinforce existing inequities, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other communities already disproportionately affected by policing.”*

*“HRA’s position is that cannabis should be legalised and regulated. But while prohibition remains, the least we can do is reduce avoidable harm by diverting people away from the criminal legal system for minor possession.”*

Cannabis cautioning can:

- Reduce unnecessary criminal records for minor offences
- Improve opportunities for health education and early support
- Reduce stigma that discourages people from seeking help
- Allow police and courts to focus on serious and violent crime
- Reduce some of the lifelong harms associated with criminalisation

*“Keeping people out of the criminal legal system for minor cannabis possession is simply a more proportionate and effective public health response,” said Madden. “But we should not confuse better policing with good policy. Ultimately, legalisation and regulation remain the best way to reduce the harms associated with cannabis prohibition.”*

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Harm Reduction Australia is a national organisation for individuals committed to reducing the health, social and economic harms potentially associated with drug use. HRA takes a non-judgmental approach to drug use within society and recognises the key role people with current and past drug use experience must play in any effective drug policy solutions. As well as working collaboratively to ensure reform to current drug policy with the primary aims of ending imprisonment, stigmatisation, discrimination and human rights violations against the people who use or have used drugs. We are dedicated to reducing the harmful impact of drug use in Australia through evidence-based, sensible and safer drug policies.

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