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How Harm Reduction devastated Australia

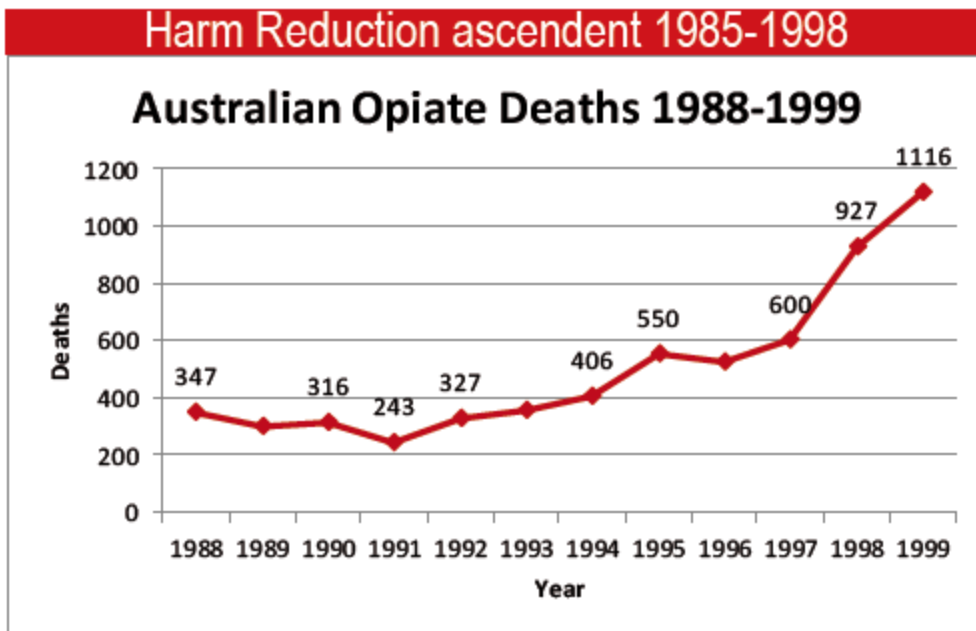
Two graphs say it all



[GARY CHRISTIAN - DRUG FREE AUS](#)

DEC 31, 2024

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1985 - Australia's world debut of Harm Reduction

In 1985 Australia was the [first](#) country worldwide to introduce Harm Reduction** programs (Needle & Syringe (NSPs) as well as methadone maintenance programs) as an official third pillar of its Federal drug policy.

Meant to reduce drug-related deaths and harm, Australia's mortality [quadrupled](#) during the first 14 years from around [250](#) deaths in 1984 to [1,116](#) in 1999.

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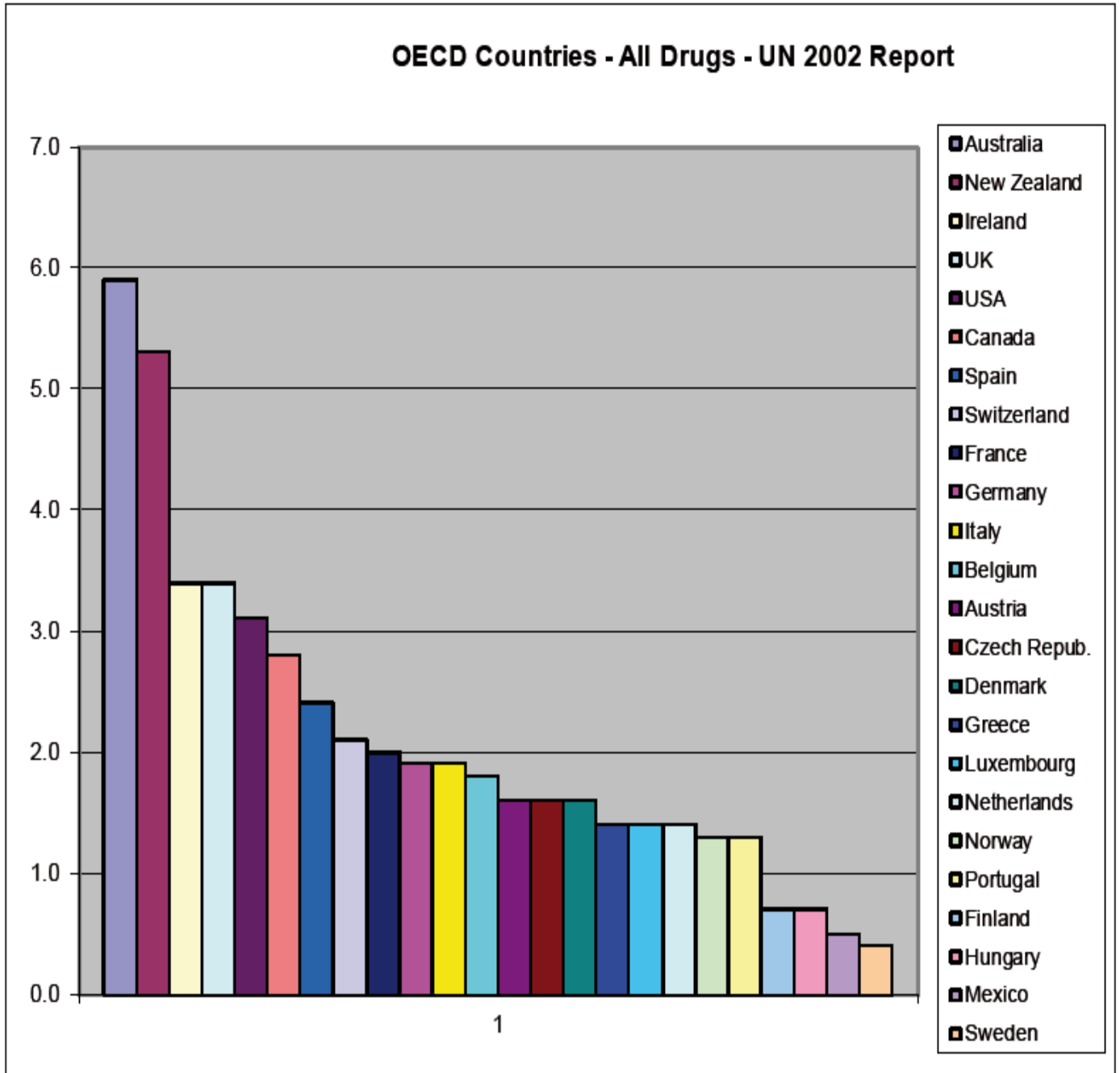
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Use of all major illicit drug categories skyrocketed as well. By the 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, that is within thirteen years, [use](#) in metro areas of Australia increased as below:

- **Amphetamine** increased 500%
- **Cannabis** increased 300%
- **Cocaine** increased 400%
- **Ecstasy** increased 750%
- **Heroin** increased 300%

Looking at United Nations' [Drug Report](#) figures for all countries worldwide, by 1998 Australia had the highest drug use amongst OECD countries, almost double that of the third, fourth and fifth highest countries. Only New Zealand, in second place, came close, having also adopted Harm Reduction programs in [1987](#).

The graph below, where UN Drug Report figures typically lag by 3-4 years, shows an aggregate average for each country's percentage use of cannabis, cocaine, speed/ice, ecstasy and opiates.



Harm Reduction programs, with their explicit 'safe use of illicit drugs' messaging, devastated Australian families with skyrocketing deaths and use.

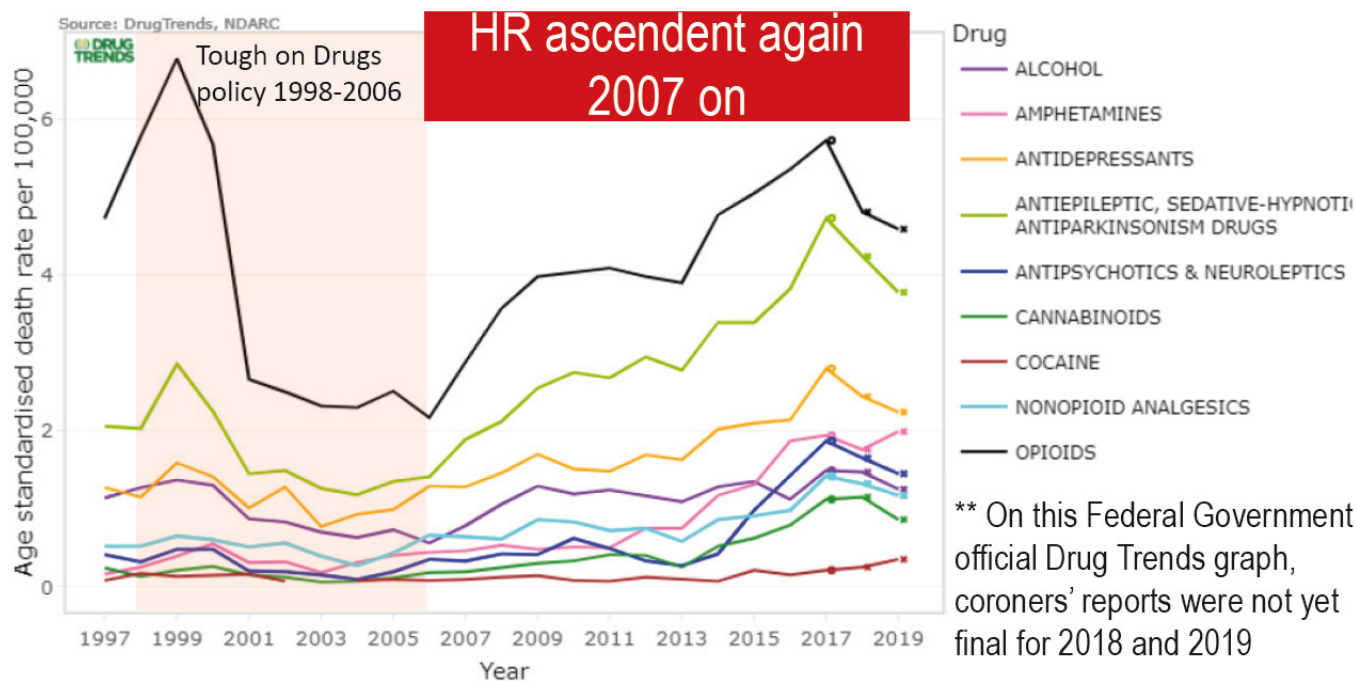
1998 - Tough on Drugs as a valid 'control'

In 1998, the Federal Government, responding to community alarm at the unacceptable mortality, introduced a new approach called [Tough on Drugs](#). Quadrupling the drugs budget to focus on prevention messaging, heavily expanded rehab and better policing of borders saw use of any illicit drug decrease by [39%](#) and overdose deaths plummet by [67%](#) by 2001, which is where mortality remained for 7 years. Throughout this period the Government chose not to close any Harm Reduction programs, which in light of this analysis, were simply running interference as an impediment to even better outcomes.

Nevertheless, this drug policy approach over a nine year period acted as a control by which the other two periods of Harm Reduction ascendancy can be judged.

2007 - Prevention takes a back seat once again

With a new Federal Government scrapping Tough on Drugs in 2007, prevention and rehab took a back seat, although heroin supply at the borders remained suppressed. And what happened was a virtual repeat of the first Harm Reduction era, demonstrating the same harm-multiplying dynamic. Yet with this official government [graph](#) below (with our added commentary overlaid) there is more to see than with previous the data.



In the decade following 2007 opiate deaths increased [260%](#), while other illicit drugs contributing to overdose deaths each increased [210%-590%](#). The reinstatement of a Harm Reduction priority was clearly a tide that lifted all boats.

We therefore find it conclusive that Harm Reduction has very demonstrably, substantially and consistently multiplied drug-related deaths and harm in this country.

Harm Reduction proponents will invariably claim that there is some hidden confounder that invalidates any conclusion, but the lockstep rise and fall of all drug types in concert with the differing drug policy eras rules out any major change in supply for any illicit (barring the 2000 heroin drought), just as it does with any possibility of a change in definition of a drug-related death. There are no viable confounders.

What is clear is that drug prevention and rehabilitation, as the first demand reduction pillar of Australia's 'Harm Minimisation' approach, along with supply reduction at our borders, are both undermined by any

'safe use of illicit drugs' programming which is an explicit and implicit message of any harm reduction intervention.

Australia has given the world a gift of a viable control drug policy period which ably shows the devastation caused by Harm Reduction.

It is time for the world to stand up and take notice. Hundreds of thousands of lives will be saved each year when all countries, including Australia, follow the lead of Australia's Tough on Drugs policy.

** Harm Reduction, by [definition](#), has no vested interest in drug prevention.

What is harm reduction?

A position statement from Harm Reduction International

Harm reduction refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim to reduce the harms associated with the use of psychoactive drugs in people unable or unwilling to stop. The defining features are the focus on the prevention of harm, rather than on the prevention of drug use itself, and the focus on people who continue to use drugs.

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