

## **The impact of illicit drugs on families**

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In February 2007 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services commenced an inquiry into the impact of illicit drugs on families. The Committee's focus of attention was on how the Australian Government can better address the impact of the importation, production, sale, use and prevention of illicit drugs on families.

The Committee was particularly interested in: the financial, social and personal cost to families who have a member(s) using illicit drugs, including the impact of drug induced psychoses or other mental disorders; the impact of harm minimisation programs on families; and ways to strengthen families who are coping with a member(s) using illicit drugs.

In its Submission to the Inquiry, Families Australia made 11 recommendations. The submission and recommendations were informed by focus groups and an Expert Forum convened by Families Australia in March 2007. Below is an edited version of the Families Australia submission.

### ***Overview***

The lives of multitudes of Australians and their families have been, and are today, being ruined by illicit and licit substance abuse. The exact costs of the problems are unquantifiable but are undoubtedly massive in personal, social and economic terms. Families themselves bear enormous cost and pain.

Australia's national strategies need to take into account the impacts of both licit and illicit drugs on individuals and families. We need to know a great deal more about the dimensions of the problem, especially as it affects children, and about integrated family support and drug treatment programs that work at the service delivery level.

We need greater coherence between national strategies and more emphasis on, and funding for, effective whole-of-society programs based on early intervention and responses that tackle co-occurring problems such as substance abuse and mental health in an integrated and long-term manner. A national framework for child protection and family wellbeing is urgently required.

Drug treatment services need additional assistance to run family-centred support programs which take into account the differing needs and requirements of families. Kinship carers, including grandparents who provide primary care for grandchildren, require further support.

Mutually reinforcing and evidence-based education and media programs are also required to increase community awareness.

Families Australia makes the following recommendations.

### ***Costs and impacts***

1. The Parliamentary Inquiry might consider taking into account the impact on individuals, families and communities of the abuse of both licit and illicit drugs, including situations where both licit and illicit drugs are being used.
2. Research should be undertaken into:
  - early intervention strategies aimed at families, children and young people to guide whole-of-society and whole-of-community approaches for building family wellbeing and resilience and reducing the incidence of substance abuse and correlated problems, including child abuse and neglect;
  - evidence-based ways to assist drug treatment services to include families, especially children and high risk families with parental substance abuse, in delivering holistic and integrated services;
  - the situation for children and siblings in families affected by parental drug use, as well as for other family members such as grandparents;
  - the cost effectiveness of drug supply and demand reduction strategies; and
  - the costs borne by those providing out-of-home care (foster and kinship), and likely future trends for this form of care.

### ***Harm minimisation***

3. Harm minimisation should be reiterated and supported as the central guiding principle for all national drug policies and programs.
4. Greater effort should be made by governments to promote public understanding of the meaning of 'harm minimisation'.

### ***Strengthening families***

#### Policy level

5. A national family wellbeing framework should be developed as a collaborative undertaking between governments, community organisations, researchers and families to guide family policy, research and funding allocations.
6. A National Child Protection Strategy should be developed and adopted by Australian, State and Territory governments as a matter of urgency based on the work of the 2006 National Child Protection Conference.
7. Governments through the Council of Australian Governments should be encouraged to re-examine the overall coherence and connectivity between strategies dealing with co-occurring issues such as mental health and substance abuse; they should also recognise the need for long-term program interventions through multi-year (longer than three year) funding cycles.
8. Greater emphasis should be given in policy and program design and delivery to:
  - family support which is integrated with drug treatment approaches (such as local family support groups) and which takes into account the differing needs and requirements of families;
  - early intervention approaches for high risk families, for example, through parent education; and
  - programs that address in an integrated manner co-occurring issues of substance abuse and other issues, such as mental health.

### ***Services and delivery***

9. The capacities of service providing organisations to provide family support in drug treatment programs should be greatly strengthened, for example by:
  - disseminating information about 'good' and 'best' practice in drug and family support services, especially where there are co-occurring issues;

- offering support programs in areas such as parenting, budgeting and other life skills to parents with substance abuse problems during pregnancy and their children’s early years;
- developing and/or replicating programs that offer effective therapeutic, mentoring and other supports for children with substance dependent parents;
- increasing support for family members by greater access to counselling, respite, support networks and discussion groups; and
- providing more training for service-level staff on ways to work with families, based on understandings of risk and protective factors.

10. Additional resources should be devoted to public education and media campaigns which are mutually reinforcing, evidence-based and comprehensive.

11. In relation to grandparents providing primary care, governments should provide additional assistance, including in the following areas:

- a national information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website) to provide information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters and referral to local services and supports;
- further consideration by State and Territory governments of the payment of the foster carer allowance to grandparents who are providing primary care;
- further consideration by State and Territory governments of the adequacy of financial support for grandparents to meet the needs of grandchildren in their care who are not under formal care and protection orders;
- small grants provided to communities through local, State/Territory and Australian governments for support groups, respite services and local information; and
- further research into the differing needs of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse grandparents.

The full submission is available at: [www.familiesaustralia.org.au](http://www.familiesaustralia.org.au)