

Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA

Minister for Health

Minister for Families and Community Services

Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Member for Kurrajong

RESPONSE TO QUESTION ON NOTICE**Questions on Notice Paper No 36****27 October 2023****Question No. 1480**

Asked by **MRS ELIZABETH KIKKERT MLA** –

- 1) What indicators does the ACT Government track to help assess levels of illicit drug usage in the ACT.
- 2) What new indicators will the ACT Government implement, after decriminalisation, to better track illicit drug usage.

MINISTER STEPHEN-SMITH - The answer to the Member's question is as follows:

- 1) Developing and sharing data is a priority area under the *National Drug Strategy 2017-2026*. There are several national programs for monitoring illicit drug use that the ACT Government contributes to and can draw upon to assess levels of drug use in Canberra. Key existing sources are:
 - Wastewater monitoring as part of the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) – occurs every two months in capital cities, including Canberra, and is reported three times a year.
 - Data from Drug Trends monitoring program by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW, including:
 - Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) – annual survey data from 100 Canberrans who regularly inject drugs that gathers information on trends in use of particular drugs and reported prices and availability in the ACT.
 - Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) – annual interview data from 100 Canberrans who regularly use stimulant and hallucinogenic drugs that gathers information on trends in use of particular drugs and reported prices and availability in the ACT.
 - National Drug Strategy Household Survey – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). A three-yearly survey of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use in Australia, including data from the ACT.

- Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey – three-yearly survey of school students' drug use, including ACT students.

While wastewater testing is a very good source of information on population level consumption of key drugs at regular timepoints, caution is needed in interpreting short-term fluctuations as long-term trends. Wastewater also provides little information on, for example, problematic patterns of drug use, or drug use in priority populations.

It is important to consider usage information in combination with other sources of information, for example on adverse health and social impacts. ACT-specific sources of data and information available to the Government that may indicate levels of use of specific types of drugs leading to harms, such as:

- Drug-related ambulance attendances;
- Drug-related emergency department presentations and hospitalisations; and
- Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services' National Minimum Dataset – annual treatment data that indicates the drugs people attend treatment for, and the treatment provided.

- 2) Given the robust and validated existing indicators, it is unlikely that new indicators of drug usage will be developed. Regularly updated estimates of consumption levels are provided by wastewater testing.

Long-term trend data are available from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey and the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey. Developing new data sources is unlikely to be cost-effective due to the substantial existing data sources available.

Existing research does not indicate that a reduction of penalties for illicit drugs necessarily increases drug use. There is also not necessarily a straightforward relationship between population level rates of use and drug related harms.

The CanTEST health and drug checking service, for example, provides intelligence on drugs that are present in the ACT market, as well as enabling direct feedback on the contents of the illicit drugs to be provided to the consumer. Drug alerts are issued when particularly harmful drugs are detected in the market.

The Government has also invested in new equipment for the ACT Government Analytical Laboratories to better facilitate identification of drugs that have led to clinical presentations to Canberra hospitals.

Approved for circulation to the Member and incorporation into Hansard.



Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Health

Date: 26/11/23

This response required 8 hours and 10 minutes to complete, at an approximate cost of \$432.66.