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Media release

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DRUGS POLICY FAILING

New Directions Needed

Australia's 'Tough on Drugs' policy has failed to significantly reduce domestic drug markets or confront drug-related mental health disorders according to a new report from the Australia Institute.

The report, titled *Drug Law Reform: Beyond Prohibition*, by the Institute's Deputy Director, Andrew Macintosh, calls on governments to shift the emphasis in dealing with illicit drugs from law enforcement to treatment and prevention strategies. The issue of drug abuse needs to be confronted as a health rather than a legal problem.

"Four out of every five state and federal dollars allocated to dealing with illicit drug issues are going to law enforcement," Mr Macintosh said. "This hugely disproportionate spending of funds has not been accompanied by significant reductions in drug use and drug-related harm, but it has been accompanied by increased mental health and other social problems.

"Treatment on the other hand has been shown to substantially reduce drug and mental health problems and drug-related crime and corruption. Studies have shown that treatment is extremely cost effective, yielding savings of up to \$12 for every dollar invested."

Mr Macintosh said the Council of Australian Government's strategy to address mental health issues, which is due out in June, should adopt a treatment-oriented approach to drug misuse rather than the counterproductive stance currently espoused by the federal and several state governments.

"We are coming at the problem from the wrong way. Eighty per cent of drug arrests in 2003/04 involved consumption offences and 60 per cent were for using or possessing cannabis," Mr Macintosh said.

"This is back to front thinking. Users are at the end of the line. Moreover the statistics show that legal threats are not deterring them. Prevention and treatment programs within a health context hold far more promise."

The report finds that strict drug law enforcement policies have failed to dent illicit drug markets and have exacerbated the social cost of illicit drug use.

"There is much that is illusory in present claims to success in confronting the illicit drug trade," Mr Macintosh said. "The recent heroin drought for example is not so much the result of law enforcement but of a decision by heroin producers and traffickers to switch to methamphetamines. The Federal Government pats itself on the back for the decline in heroin use, while methamphetamine problems have increased dramatically."

"When you lay the facts on the table, they are indisputable. If we really want to get anywhere with this issue, we must start taking viable alternatives seriously."