

Drug Law Reforms Survey

SUMMARY REPORT
May 2026



Background

The ACT Government conducted a survey to explore community perceptions of ACT drug law reforms which were introduced in October 2023.

The reforms reduce penalties for possessing small amounts of certain illicit drugs, aiming to divert individuals away from the justice system and towards health and support services.

The survey forms part of an independent evaluation of the reforms being conducted by the Drug Policy Modelling Program (DPMP) at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales (UNSW). The DPMP and ACT Government co-developed the survey questions.

It is one of several methods the DPMP is using to gather community input to inform the evaluation. Further information about the evaluation is available on the UNSW [website](#).

Methodological Notes:

- All YourSay panellists were invited to participate in the survey. A reminder email was sent on 18 September 2025.
- To enhance representation of ACT residents aged 18–34 years in the survey, an external panel provider was engaged, resulting in an additional n=199 completed responses from **this age group**. These additional responses represent 12% of the total sample of 1,613 respondents.
- Survey results were weighted by age, gender and place of birth to align with population proportions from the ABS 2021 Census.
- Statistical significance testing was conducted at the 95% confidence level. Where significant differences between subgroups occur, these are indicated throughout the report.
- Net score differences of $\pm 1\%$ may occur due to rounding.



How many?

1,613

Who?

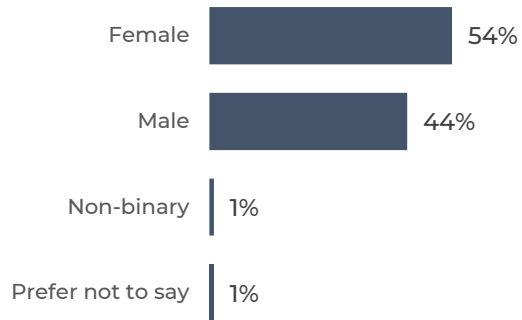
ACT residents
18+

When?

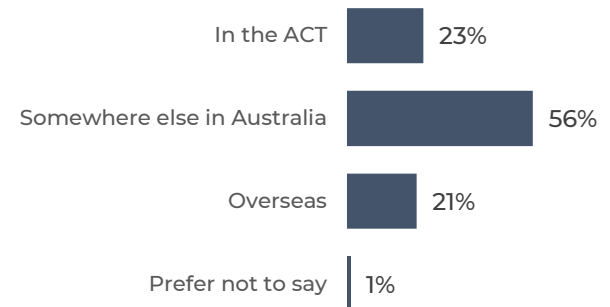
9 - 22 Sept 2025

Sample profile (n=1,613 unweighted)

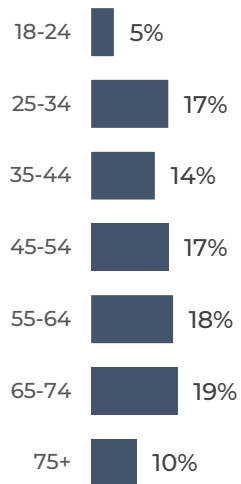
Gender



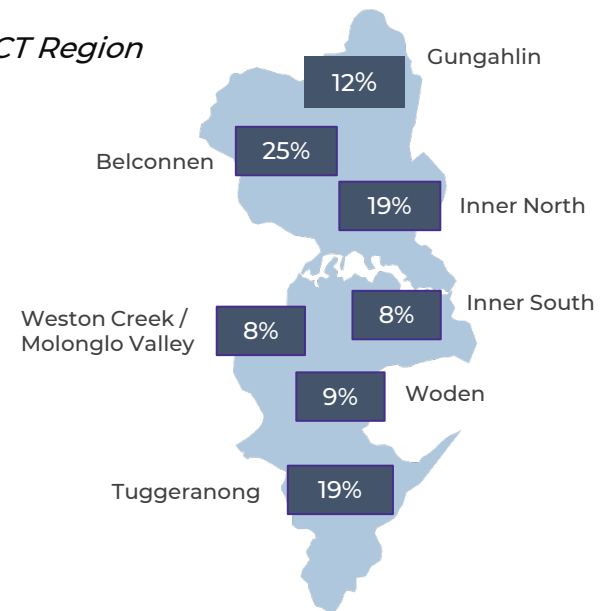
Place of birth



Age group



ACT Region



Executive summary

Executive summary



Most respondents are aware of ACT drug laws, but their depth of knowledge is generally limited.

- ▶ Most respondents have heard about the ACT's drug law reforms - 78% say they know at least a little about it.
- ▶ However, nearly two-thirds of respondents (61%) say they know nothing or very little about it, suggesting a gap between awareness and understanding.



Most respondents expressed interest in the reforms, with the greatest interest focused on their potential to reduce drug-related stigma and improve public health outcomes.

- ▶ Most respondents report being either very interested (25%) or moderately (41%) in ACT drug law reforms, suggesting a generally engaged community. Only 3% of respondents are not at all interested.
- ▶ Analysis of open-ended responses indicates there is also interest in other issues such as public safety and crime, policy, evaluation and outcomes (see slide 9).



Public understanding of the legal status for adults who possess small amounts of illegal drugs is mixed, further suggesting that there is an opportunity to strengthen public communication and clarify key aspects of the reforms.

- ▶ Nearly half of all respondents (47%) correctly identified that all drugs are illegal but possessing small amounts of some drugs attract a fine rather than criminal charges.
- ▶ About one-in-ten respondents (11%) incorrectly believe that all drugs are illegal and leads to a criminal charge.

Executive summary



Most respondents do not believe that individuals caught with small amounts of illicit drugs for personal use should receive a criminal record.

- ▶ Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) don't believe that individuals caught with small amounts of illicit drugs for personal use should receive a criminal record.
- ▶ People born overseas are slightly less likely to share this view (58% compared to 64% of the whole sample).



Respondents are more inclined to education and treatment programs rather than punitive measures (such as a prison sentence) for those found in possession of small quantities of drugs.

- ▶ The most preferred response for anyone found in possession of small quantities of drugs is referral to a drug education or treatment program. Notably, three-in-ten respondents (30%) believe no action should be taken for possession of small quantities of non-prescribed cannabis.
- ▶ A prison sentence isn't among the most preferred response for any drug. However, compared to a 2021 YourSay Panel which also explored community attitudes to drugs, preference for prison sentences has increased for some drugs including cocaine (up 8 pp), heroin (up 6 pp), ecstasy (up 5 pp) and methamphetamine (up 4 pp).



Perceptions of the impact of drug law reforms are somewhat mixed e.g. more people agreed than disagreed that the reforms reduce harm, but many are unsure or neutral.

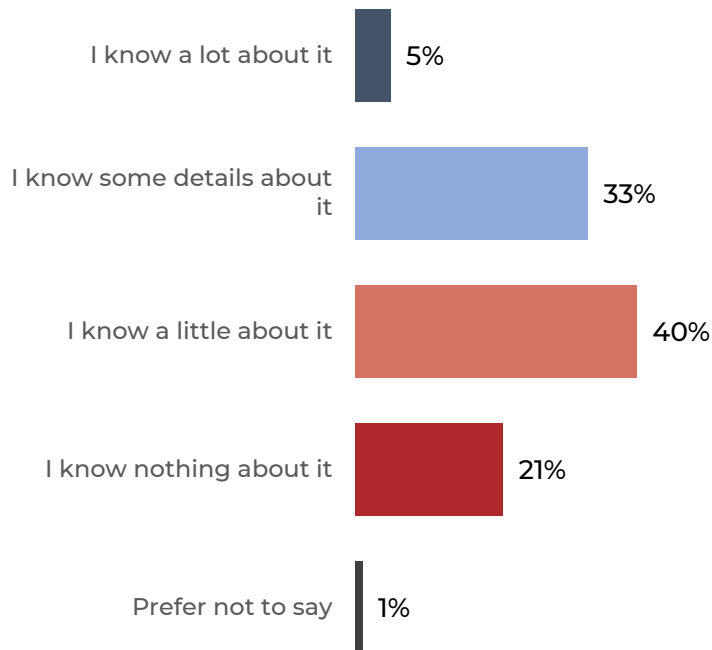
- ▶ Four-in-ten respondents (40%) agree that ACT drug law reforms are reducing the harms associated with drugs, while 20% disagree. The remaining 40% are either unsure or neutral (i.e. neither agreed nor disagreed).
- ▶ Nearly half of all respondents (47%) agree that the reforms help provide people with necessary support, while nearly four-in-ten (38%) disagreed that the reforms have increased drug use; however, many respondents are also unsure or neutral (39% and 44% respectively).

Understanding drug law reforms

Knowledge of, and interest in, drug law reforms

Q1: Before today, how much did you know about drug law reforms in the ACT?

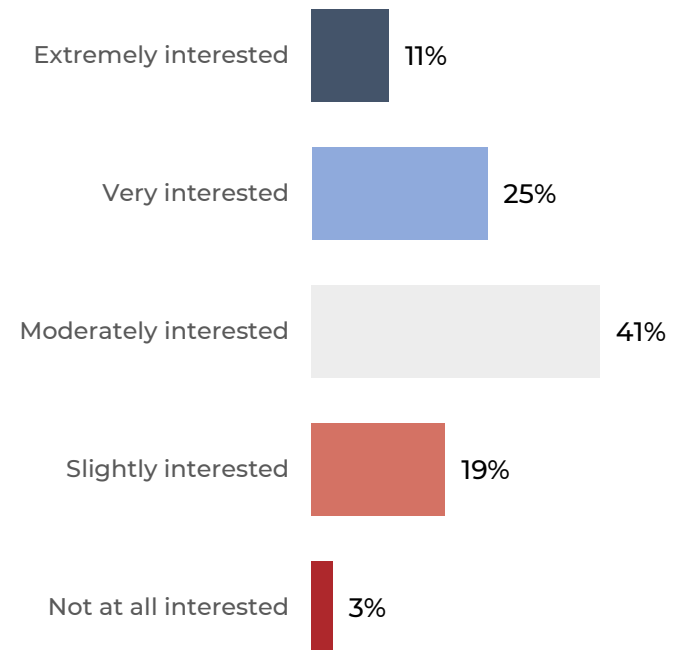
Total responses: 1,613



Key insight: People born overseas are significantly more likely to report knowing nothing about drug law reforms (28%), compared with 21% of the overall sample.

Q2: How interested are you in drug law reforms in the ACT?

Total responses: 1,613

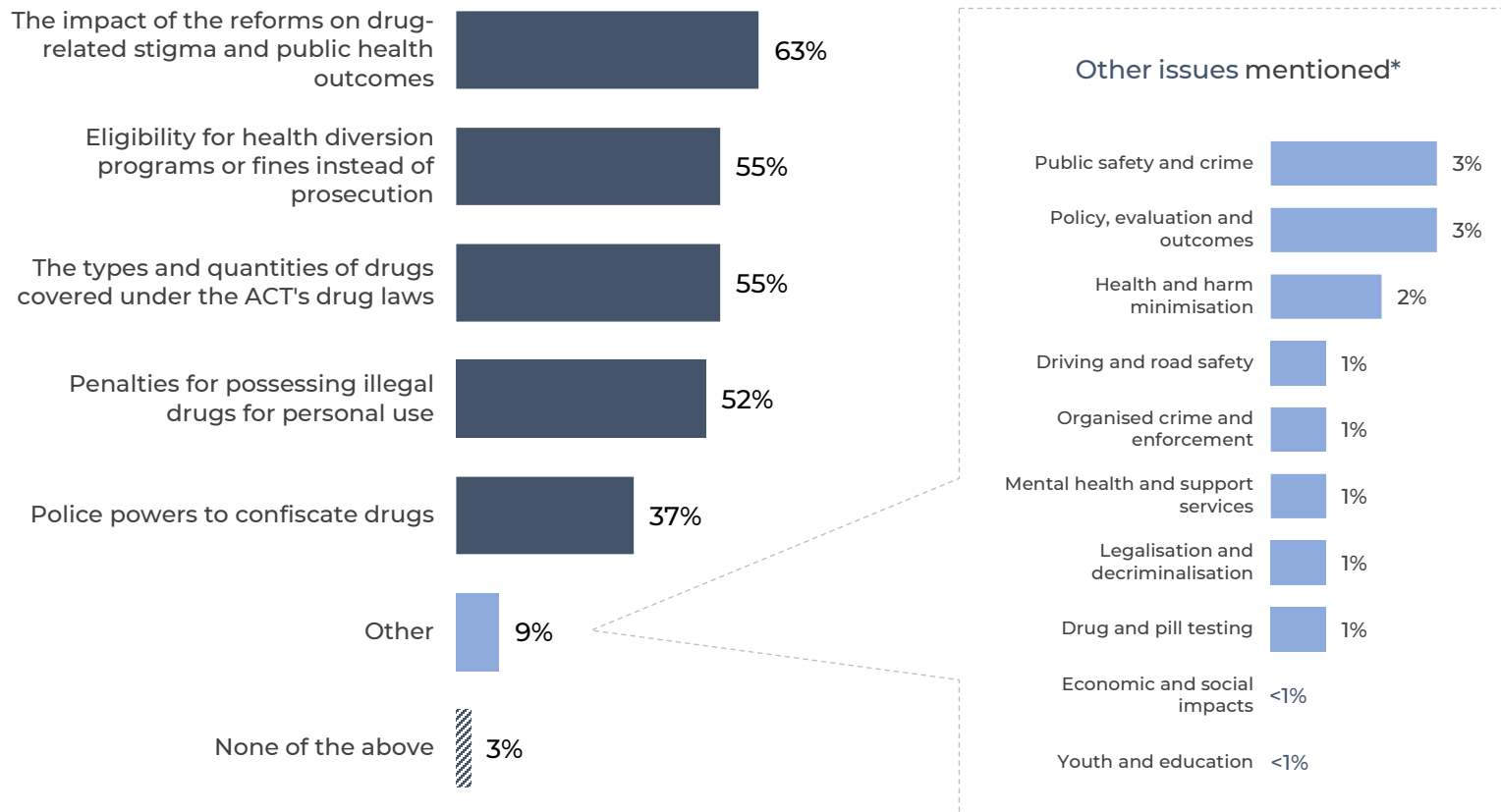


Interest in aspects of drug law reforms

Q3: Which of the following aspects of drug law reforms in the ACT are you most interested in? (Select all that apply)

This question was only shown to respondents who expressed interest in drug law reforms.

Total responses: 1,568

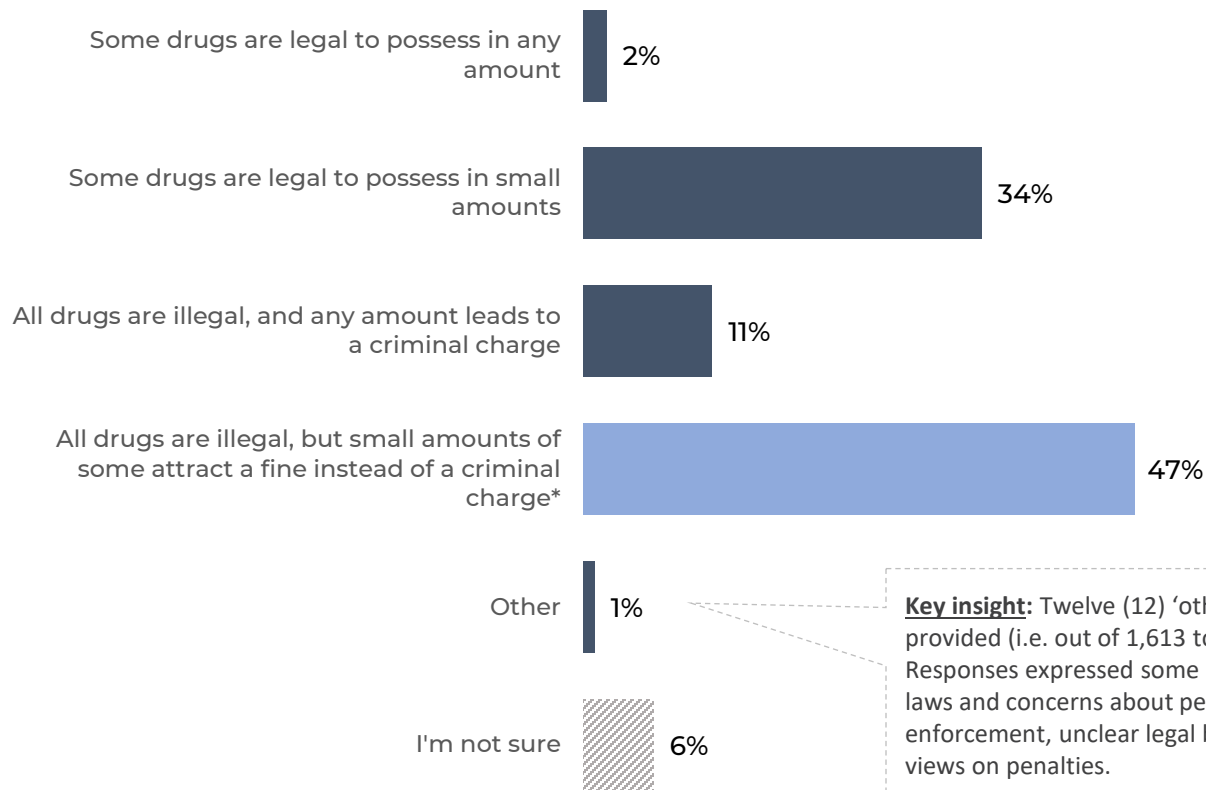


*Total exceeds 9% because some respondents reported multiple additional issues.

Understanding of legal status for possessing illegal drugs

Q: What do you think is the current legal status for adults who possess small amounts of illegal drugs (not including cannabis) in the ACT?

Total responses: 1,613

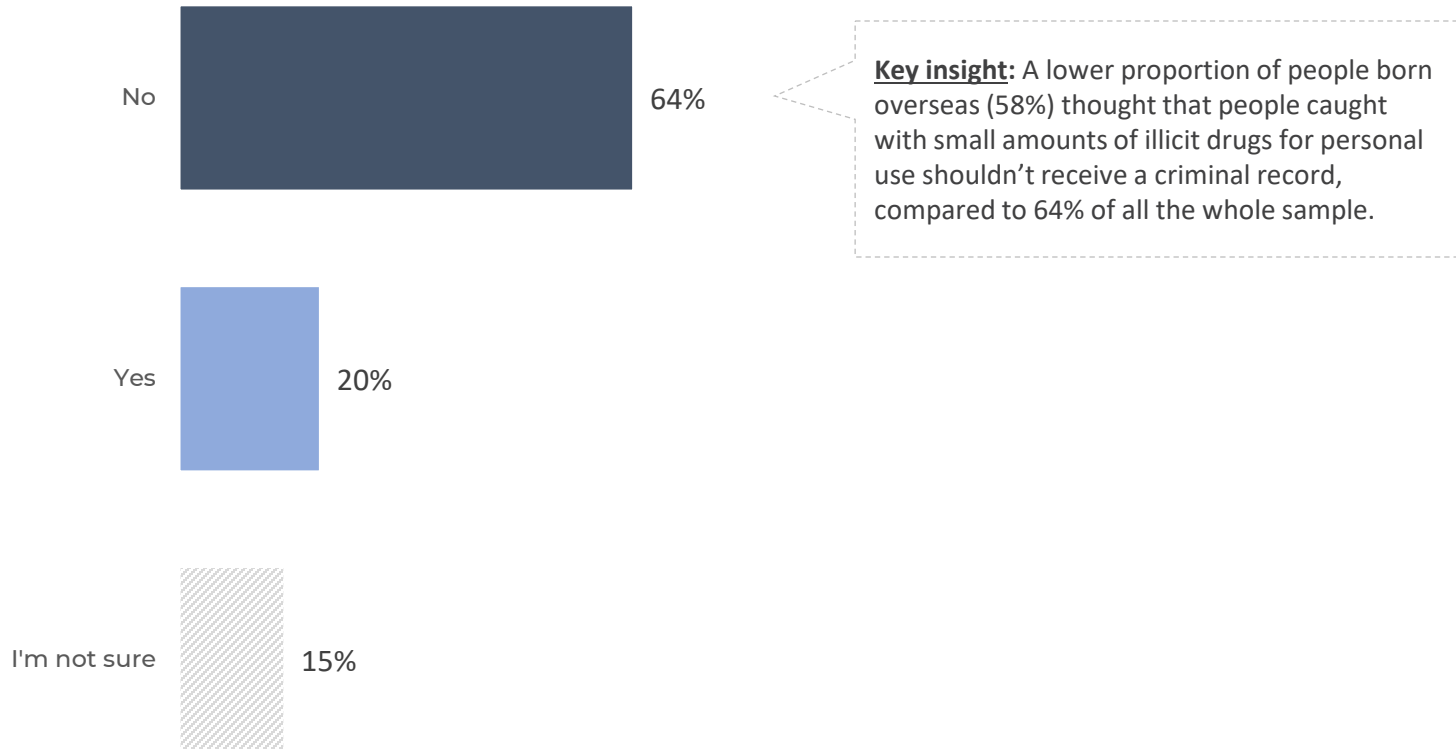


Perceptions of drug usage

Community views on receiving a criminal record

Q: Do you think that people caught with small amounts of illicit drugs for personal use should receive a criminal record?

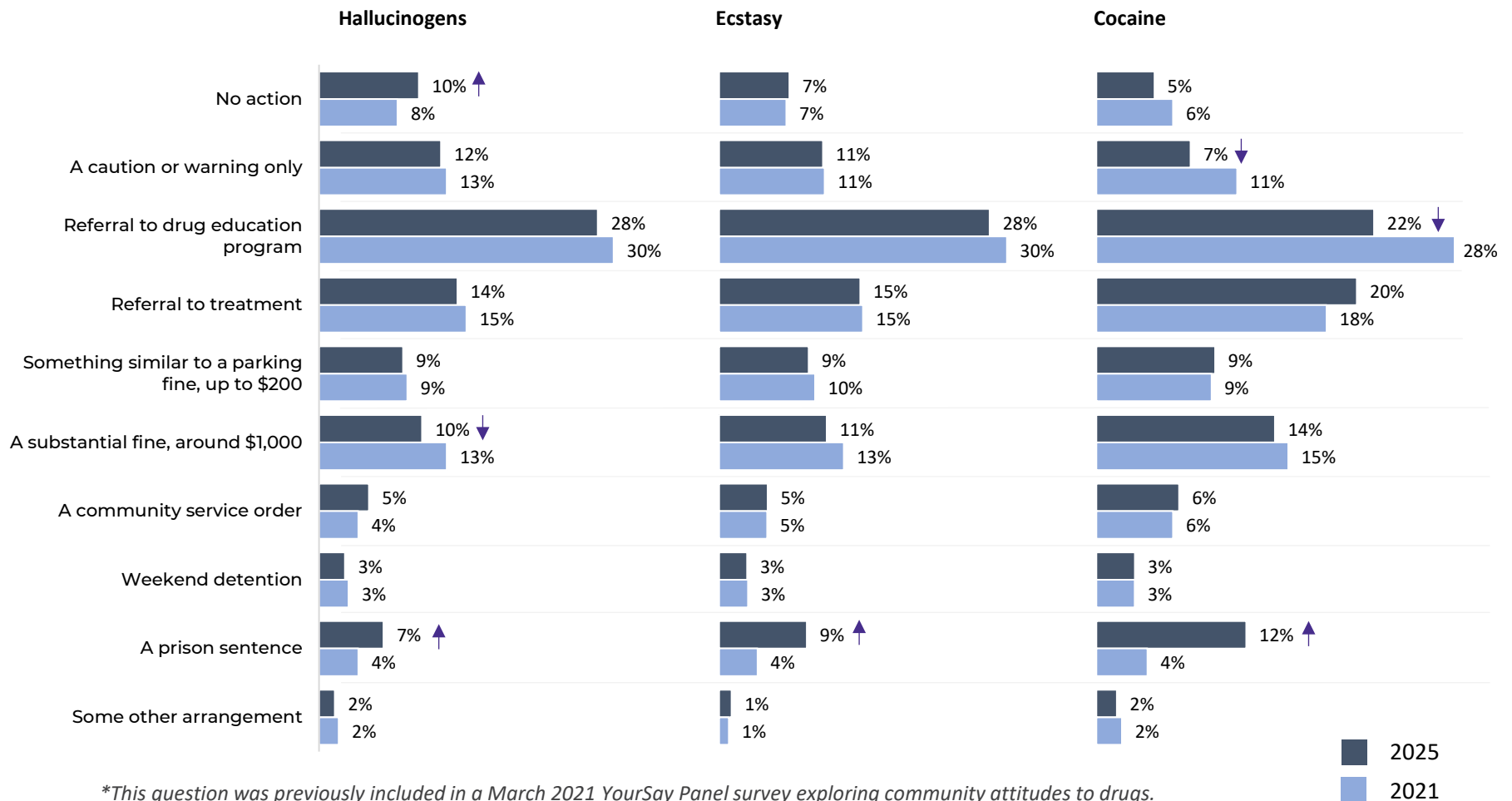
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Community views on drug possession penalties

*Q: What single action best describes what you think should happen to anyone found in possession of small quantities of the following drugs for personal use?**

Total responses: 1,613 (2025); 1,617 (2021) - Percentages based on those able to provide an answer (i.e. excluding Don't know / I'm not sure)



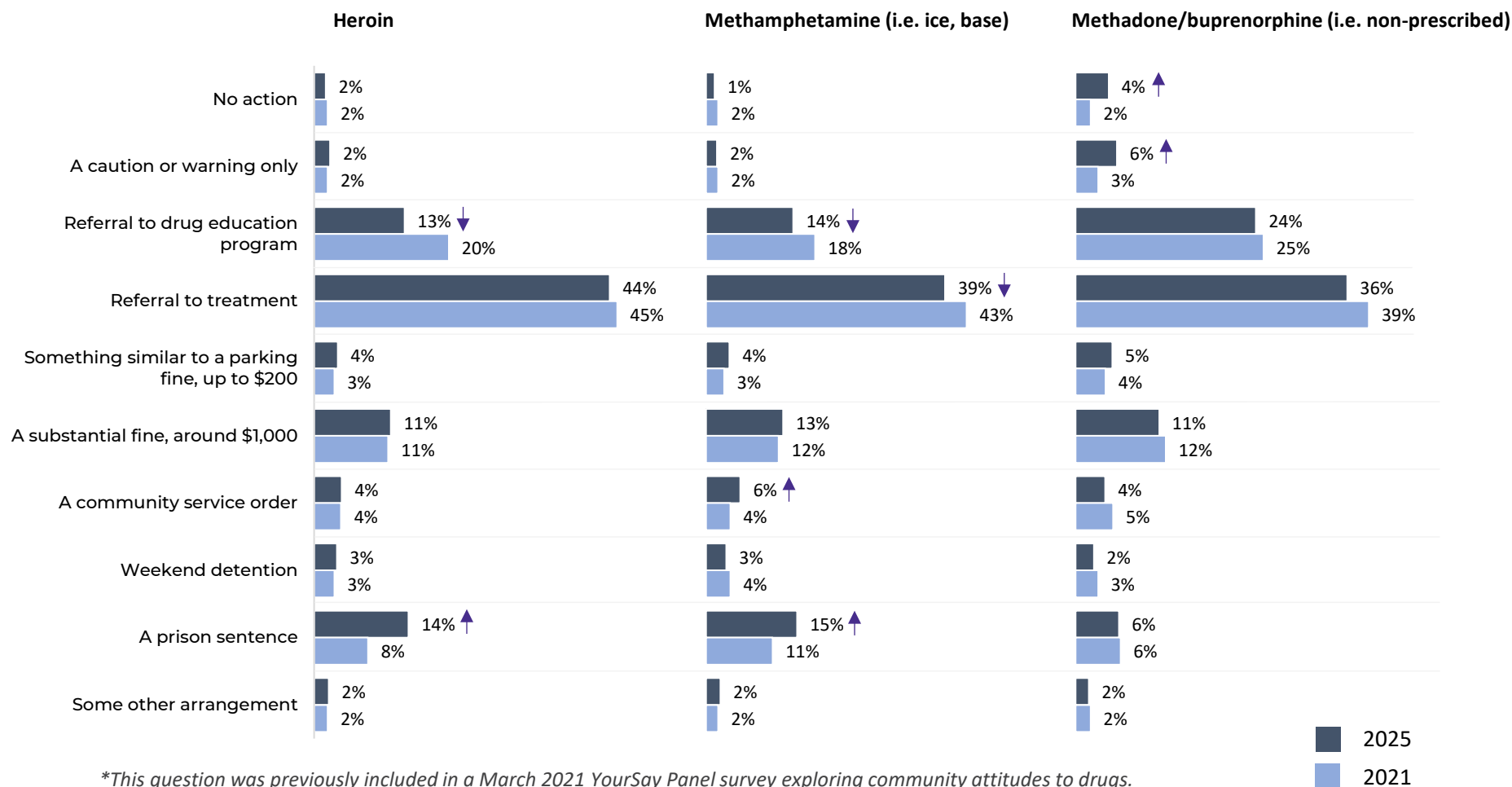
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↑ ↓ Denotes significant change compared to 2021 survey results.

Community views on drug possession penalties

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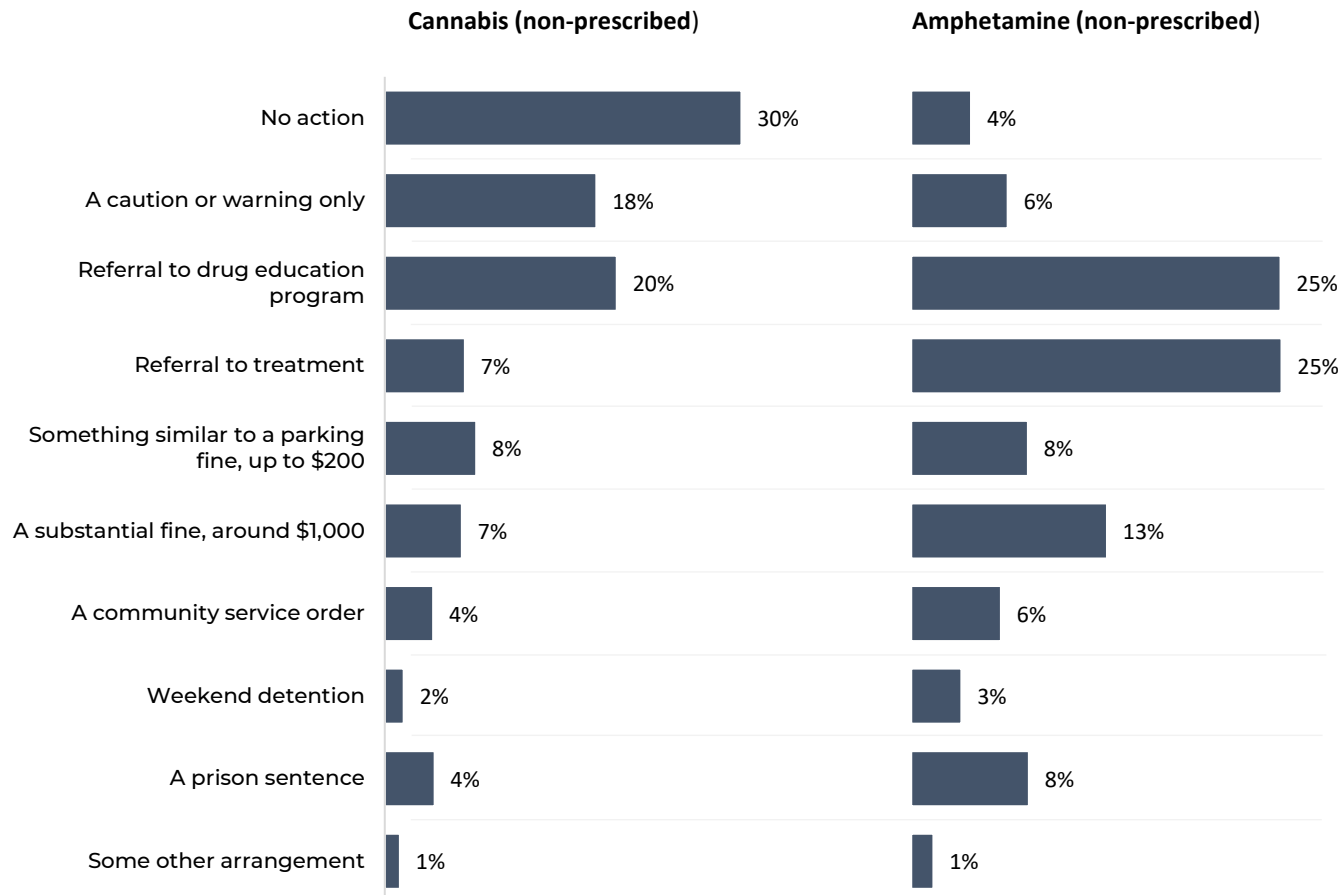
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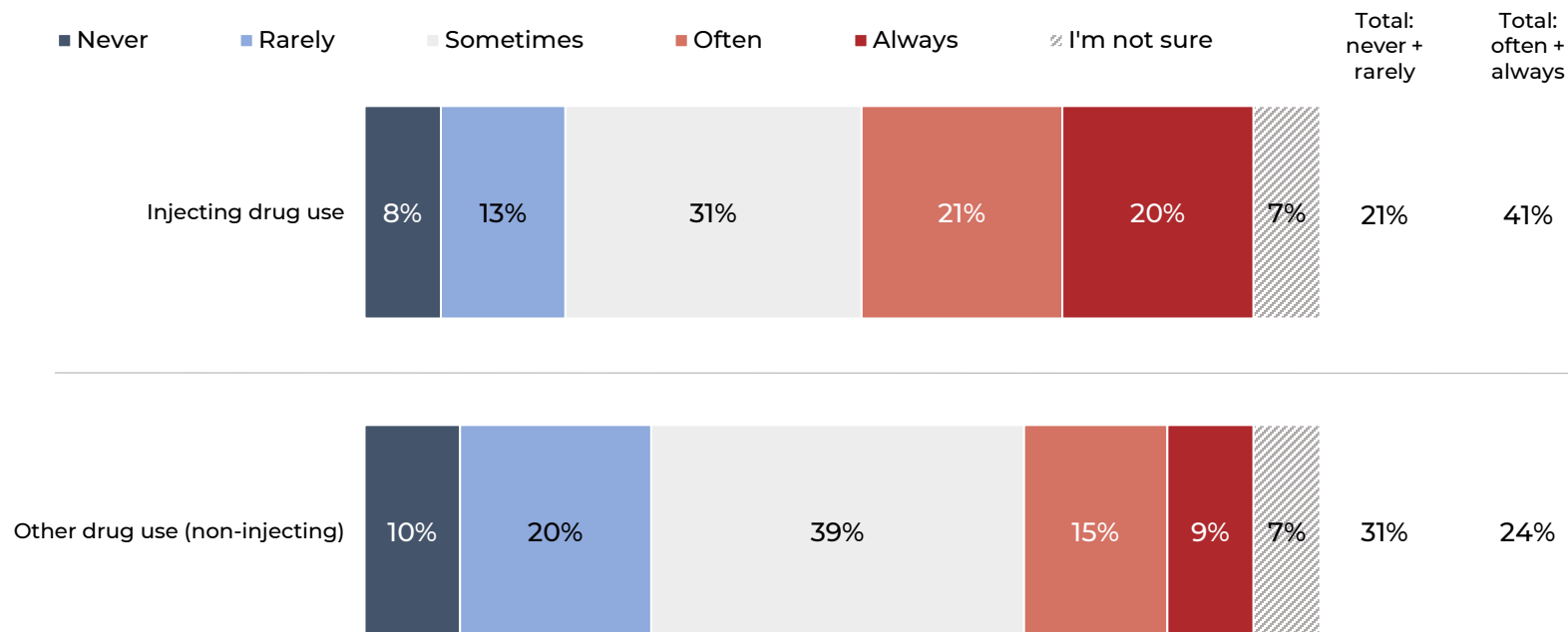


*Data not collected in March 2021 YourSay Panel survey which explored community attitudes towards drugs.

Stigma and behaviour toward drug use

Q: Do you think that you would behave negatively towards other people because of their...

Total responses: 1,613



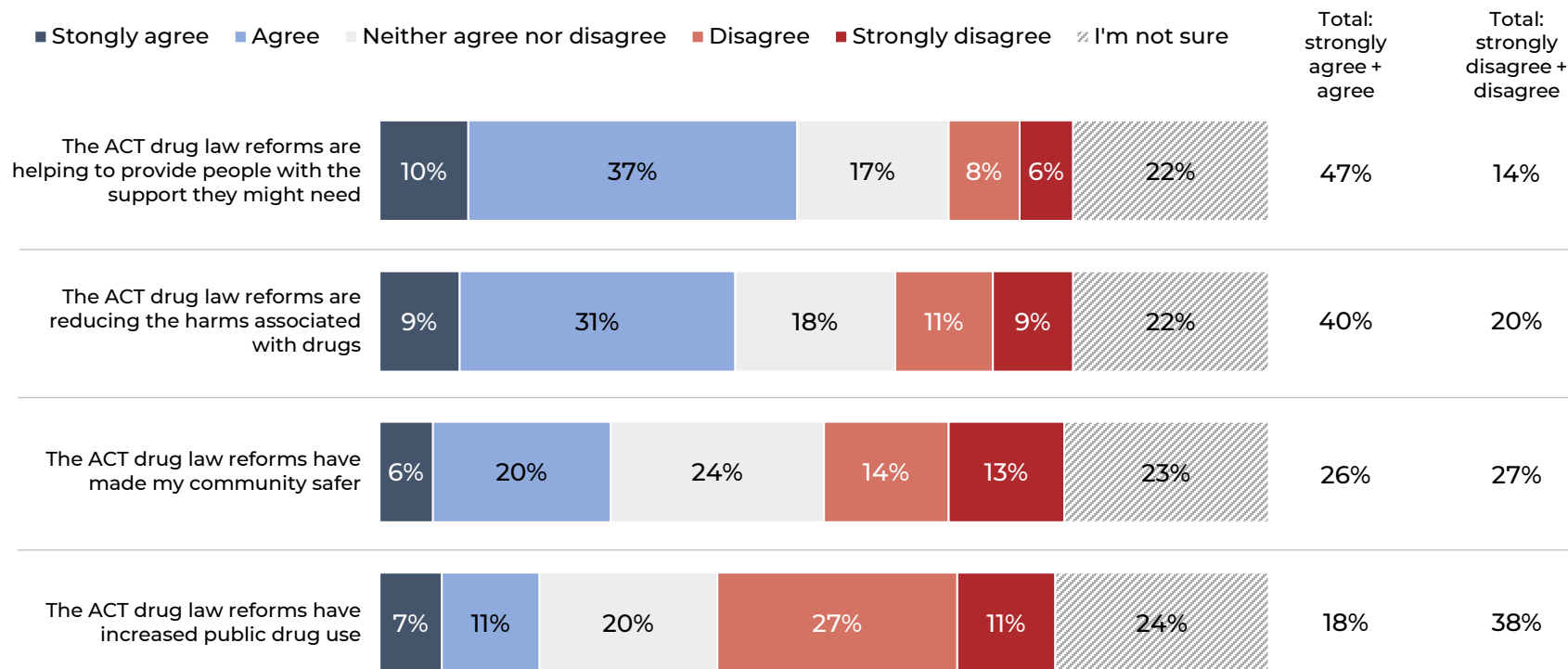
Key insight #1: Younger Canberrans (18–34) are significantly less likely than the overall sample and other age groups to behave negatively toward people who use drugs. Within this group, 27% said they would never or rarely behave negatively toward others because of injecting drug use, and 39% for non-injecting drug use.

Key insight #2: Men are significantly more likely than the overall sample and other gender groups to behave negatively towards people who use drugs, with 48% of men saying they would 'Always' or 'Often' behave negatively towards others because of injecting drug use, and 29% for non-injecting drug use.

Perceptions of drug law reform impacts

Q: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Total responses: 1,613



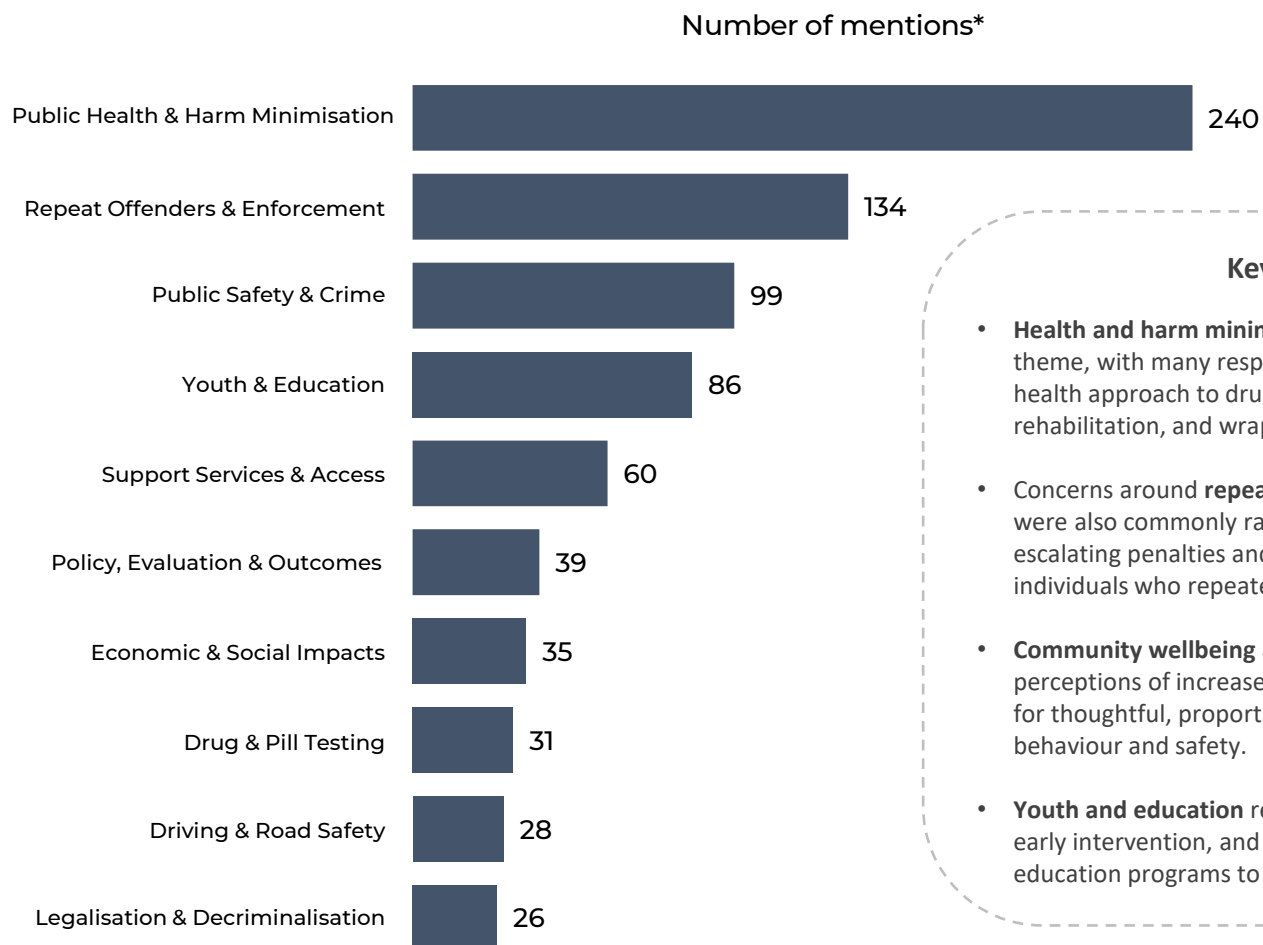
Key insight #1: Younger Canberrans (aged 18–34) are significantly more likely than the overall sample and other age groups to agree that the reforms are reducing harm (53%), helping people access support (61%), and making their communities safer (39%).

Key insight #2: Older Canberrans (aged 65+) are significantly less likely than the overall sample and other age groups to agree that the reforms are reducing harm (32%) and making their communities safer (19%).

Other feedback

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about drug law reforms in the ACT?

Total responses: 635



Key insights

- **Health and harm minimisation** is the most prominent theme, with many respondents supporting a public health approach to drug use, including treatment, rehabilitation, and wraparound services.
- Concerns around **repeat offenders and enforcement** were also commonly raised, with some calling for escalating penalties and mandatory treatment for individuals who repeatedly offend.
- **Community wellbeing and safety** issues included perceptions of increased visibility of drug use and calls for thoughtful, proportionate responses to public behaviour and safety.
- **Youth and education** responses emphasised prevention, early intervention, and the importance of school-based education programs to reduce future harm.



ACT
Government

YOUR SAY
PANEL