



# OVERDOSE PREVENTION QUEENSLAND

Overdose is a critical social, political,  
economic, and public health issue.

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# The numbers paint a devastating picture.

The numbers paint a devastating picture. In 2022, 2,356 Australians lost their lives to drug overdose<sup>1</sup>. This number of lives lost is nearly double the national road toll for the same period<sup>2</sup>. Each of these numbers is not just a statistic but a person—a mother, a father, a sibling, a friend. Each loss represents a tragedy that echoes through families and communities, leaving a void that can never be filled.

The drivers of unintentional overdose are complex. Individual factors include changes in tolerance following periods of abstinence or reduced use, polysubstance use, unstable housing and socio-economic status. Method of use is also an important factor in overdose. System level factors include regulatory systems related to health practitioners and medication prescribing practices, criminalisation of some substances, unregulated drug markets and limited access to harm reduction services for people who use drugs.



**2,356**

Australians lost their lives to drug overdose

# Overdose numbers will continue to grow

Australia now confronts the rising threat of potent synthetic opioids, such as nitazenes and its analogues. These have been increasingly detected in Australia by health authorities, in Border Force reporting of seizures of suspected imports, and by drug checking services<sup>3,4</sup>. This year health departments (including NSW, ACT, Victoria, South Australia, and Qld) issued public alerts based on the increase in presenting cases of nitazine-related harms, including deaths<sup>3</sup>. Nitazenes have been found to be represented as other opioids such as heroin, oxycodone, and in non-opioid drugs such as ketamine, MDMA, cocaine, alprazolam/benzodiazepines, and 3C-P<sup>3</sup>. The emergence of nitazenes has the potential to exponentially increase the already unacceptable rates of overdose in the Australian community. Overdose numbers will continue to grow if Queensland fails to take important life-saving measures to prevent overdose in our communities through a combination of enhanced harm reduction strategies.

The next step for Queensland is a strategy, working collaboratively with leading agencies and services in the sector to combat the rising threat of a synthetic opioid crisis. This plan must prioritise peer led initiatives, scaling up drug-checking services, expanding access to opioid dependence treatment, and establishing overdose prevention centres where people can use drugs safely under supervision. **Immediate action through this coordinated, evidence-based approach will save lives and protect communities.**

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### About QuIVAA

QuIVAA Inc is a charitable organisation with a mission to advocate, educate, and raise awareness about the issues facing people who use drugs to enable them to live healthy lives, free from stigma and discrimination. QuIVAA also aims to develop, support, and promote policies, training, and programs that support and advocate for equal health and human rights for people who use drugs in Queensland.



### About QuIHN

QuIHN Ltd is a not-for-profit charity providing a range of specialist social and health services relating to alcohol and other drug use and mental health since 2005. Operating Queensland-wide, QuIHN provides programs across a continuum of care comprising of harm reduction programs, therapeutic programs, and primary medical care. At QuIHN we envision a world where all people who use substances can reach their full potential, and the health and well-being outcomes of our communities are maximised.



### About QNADA

QNADA is the peak organisation representing and supporting the non government alcohol and other drugs sector. Our purpose is to support our members in the delivery of high quality AOD treatment and harm reduction services in Queensland through policy and system improvement, to achieve a system that values responses that address the social, cultural and structural determinants of health.

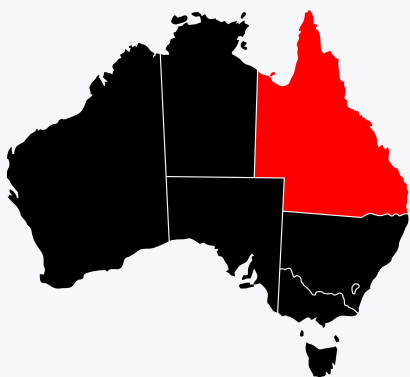


### About The Loop Australia

The Loop is an Australian not-for-profit organisation set up in 2018 to develop the sustainable provision of drug checking services in Australia. We have organising teams in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Our teams are comprised of chemists, pharmacists, sociologists, drug and alcohol specialists, GPs, toxicologists and other allied health staff. Guided by international expertise and experience, we are working to introduce world-class drug checking and harm reduction services for Australians.



**The Loop Australia**



# Action Plan

Queensland must act swiftly to address the growing threat of a synthetic opioid crisis.

A statewide response to commit to harm reduction here will protect the health of our communities and the capacity of our health system. Failure to act will surely see loss of life here similar to the devastating scale witnessed by communities in North America— and QuIVAA's work has drawn out these parallels<sup>5</sup>.


Queensland has already seen pharmaceutical opioid-related deaths rise by 90% between 2017 and 2021. Synthetic opioids present a significantly greater risk due to the potency of this group of drugs, which cause overdose in extremely small doses<sup>6</sup>, and the recent detection of their presence in drugs sold as cocaine, MDMA, ketamine, benzodiazepines and heroin<sup>7</sup>. This places all people who use drugs at elevated risks of harm.

By learning from Canada and the U.S., where fentanyl contributed to thousands of deaths<sup>8,9</sup>, Queensland can take proactive steps in protecting Queenslanders and avoiding drastic effects on our health system. A comprehensive Overdose Prevention Plan will prepare the state for a rapid response that protects communities by putting proven harm reduction strategies in place.

# Immediate Priorities

Prioritising proven peer-led harm reduction strategies is key.

People who use drugs have a longstanding history of leading harm reduction efforts in community, providing essential support where formal services may be inaccessible or stigmatising. In Queensland, the current punitive legal framework, combined with limited harm reduction funding, has created an environment where peer-led initiatives have proven to be not only necessary but critical<sup>10</sup>. A proactive, peer-led plan that integrates lived-living experience into harm reduction strategies can significantly mitigate the risks posed by potent synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and nitazenes<sup>5</sup>. A plan to integrate the efficacy of community-led interventions and peer involvement will comprise astute and responsive policy.



Queensland's response to potent synthetic opioids like fentanyl and nitazenes must focus on peer-led harm reduction and long-term systemic change.

# Policy Reform

Move towards a regulated drug market to dismantle the illicit trade and reduce synthetic opioid availability.

## Investment and enhancement for Harm Reduction services

- Peers to lead harm reduction services, offering stigma-free support, education, and safe use spaces.
- Less than 2% of the federal spend on illicit drug response budget are spent on harm reduction measures<sup>11</sup>. It is essential to increase resourcing of necessary harm reduction measures that can cater to high background rates of overdose and the rising threat of potent synthetic opioids.
- Increased coordination of transitional care for people exiting prisons and re-entering the community.

## Improving access to Opioid Dependence Treatment (ODT) in Queensland

- Addressing bottlenecks to ODT access in the community and reducing reliance on high patient-to-prescriber service models is essential to addressing opioid overdose in the community.
- Diversifying treatment entry points and creating new service models for socially and geographically disadvantaged populations is critical to reach those most at need.

## Expanding access to drug-checking services

- Scale up and expand access to drug checking services.
- Drug checking services are a critical element of keeping the community informed of and monitoring for the potential circulation of emerging classes of dangerous synthetic opioids in the community.
- Drug checking services are essential in the contemporary unregulated drug market, assisting to identify & respond to emerging threats, while also ensuring people are informed & protected.
- Drug checking services are essential for reducing overdose rates in Queensland.



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### Overdose Prevention Centres

- Drug consumption spaces that provide safer environments where people can use drugs under the supervision of professionals who can provide life-saving measures in the event of an overdose, facilitate linkage to healthcare & entry to social & welfare services.
- Strongly supported by participants, these spaces reduce overdose risks, especially with the emergence of potent synthetic opioids in the drug supply.
- These sites need to be able to cater for a wide range of drug types given synthetic opioids have been detected in different drugs.

### Overdose First Response

- Substantive increase in the availability of and access to naloxone and ensuring training in responding to and managing overdose is urgent. This includes both peers and all first responders.
- Equipping all peers to be resourced and able to respond to overdoses.
- Ensuring all first responders\* are trained and able to administer naloxone and respond to overdose.
- Peers, MHAOD services, and emergency services will be at the forefront of responding to a synthetic overdose crisis.
- Normalising drug first aid and the role of naloxone in opioid response management for all first aid and first responder training is essential.

### Drug and Overdose Monitoring Systems

- Implement real-time alerts to track potent synthetic opioids and inform communities.
- Increase the reach of Overdose Early Warning Snapshot release into communities across the state through resourced localised communication services and staffing
- Improving overdose monitoring programs to address the increasing complexity of the drug landscape to assist in more timely & more accurate data on overdoses in the community & help prioritise effective policy & resource decisions & shape targeted public health responses.

\* All emergency services (police, ambulance, accident & emergency, fire, & public safety), all MHAODSP and other healthcare services, all homelessness services, all correctional facilities and watchhouses, all entertainment and nightlife security, and local Council Rangers and Facility Workers.



## References

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- <sup>8</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. Opioid and stimulant-related harms in Canada. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/>.
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**The Loop Australia**