

PRESS RELEASE

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Increasing rates of overdose in Victoria necessitate urgent action

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) is deeply concerned about the surge in fatal overdoses in Victoria during 2022 as detailed in the data released by the Coroners Court of Victoria.

The soaring number of fatal overdoses is indicative of a preventable crisis with harm reduction measures such as Overdose Prevention Centres and Drug Testing urgently required to save lives.

549 Victorians lost their lives to fatal overdose in 2022 – the highest since at least 2009 but likely the highest on record for this state. This outcome is no less than catastrophic.

Heroin related fatal overdoses were the highest since 2000 with the drug contributing to 230 fatal overdoses – an increase of more than 33% from 2021 (173 fatal overdoses). Notably, the City of Melbourne again had the highest number of heroin related fatal overdoses – 24 in 2022, almost twice that of Yarra (14).

Mr Chris Christoforou, CEO of VAADA, says 'up until the release of this data, we would hear that there was one fatal overdose per month in the CBD. This has now doubled. It is an unambiguous and dramatic indicator of worsening heroin related harms in the City of Melbourne and highlights, with clarity, the need to fast track the implementation of an overdose prevention centre in the city'.

Alcohol related fatal overdose is also the highest since at least 2009 in Victoria, with 173 Victorians fatally overdosing with alcohol as a contributor.

Mr Christoforou continues, 'sadly this is not a surprise. We know, with surging alcohol consumption during the pandemic coupled with burgeoning treatment waitlists and a laissez fair approach to liquor regulation (particularly with the availability of online deliveries) that we would see alcohol related harms increase. This data provides yet another example of how public health reforms such as the decriminalising of public intoxication are vital to saving lives.'

Novel psychoactive substances (NPS) are drugs that, while mimicking traditional drugs, are often more harmful. In 2022, there were 46 fatal overdoses with NPS a contributing factor, up from 2 in 2018. This is an increase of over 2000% in five years. These fatalities are preventable with evidence informed policy measures such as drug checking, capable of curbing these harms.

Mr Christoforou says, 'VAADA with 77 other organisations, has called on the Victorian government to introduce drug checking as a matter of priority to reduce these harms. Currently we discover new NPS through pathology tests from those in emergency departments or morgues; drug checking services provide information about new hazardous substances prior to the substance being consumed. International evidence indicates that up to almost 90% of people who discover their drug is hazardous from a drug checking service discard the substance.'

Both methamphetamine and GHB related fatal overdoses have surpassed previous records. Methamphetamine continues to contribute to significant harms and the high death rate is a reminder of the need to invest further in AOD treatment and other support services.

The Coroners Court data also reveals that while pharmaceutical substances continue to contribute to the largest portion of fatal overdoses (just under 75%), fatal overdoses involving alcohol and illegal drugs are the highest since at least 2009. VAADA notes that there has been an upswing in the number of fatal overdoses occurring in regional Victoria, up from 101 in 2021 to 135 in 2022, with options for AOD treatment and support remaining thin in regional and rural communities.

Mr Christoforou continues, 'the 2022 overdose data breaks several records. VAADA and its members are committed to working with the Victorian government and the wider service system to reduce substance related harms and enhance community wellbeing.'

For more information or to arrange an interview please contact David Taylor on 0413 914 206.

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Media stories on alcohol and other drugs may be traumatic for some people. Support is available and we ask that media agencies consider publishing the details below:

If this story has raised issues about your own or others drug and alcohol use, please contact the national hotline for confidential counselling and referral on 1800 250 015

VAADA is the peak body that represents over 80 Alcohol and other Drug services across Victoria. On a daily basis these services are dealing with the effects of harmful alcohol and other drug consumption.