
POLICE & COURTS

Solutions posed to help Geelong kick ice addiction as court overrun

Experts have weighed in on Geelong's ice crisis, revealing how the city can shake its addiction to methamphetamines.

Olivia Shying and [Harrison Tippet](#), Geelong Advertiser

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Experts say significant investment in rehabilitation facilities and targeted support could help relieve Geelong's ice crisis.

An in-depth investigation by the Geelong Advertiser has revealed ice has seen an almost uninterrupted 10-year rise in Geelong, with local residents nearly three times as likely to die from illicit drugs than the Victorian average.

Local rehabilitation experts claim two Geelong residents are dying each week on rehabilitation waiting list, while ambulance call-outs relating to the drug have more than quadrupled since 2014.

Prominent Geelong criminal lawyer Andrew Senia has called for “special attention” and more immediate action must be taken to address the issue.

“I believe there should be, in place, more institutions to deal with these people and actually help them. We've got to look at the other side of this, and that is rehabilitation. It's not enough to just say ‘we've got an ice problem’, you've got to do something about it. And I don't see enough being done about it.”

RELATED: [Rehab boss on how ice has changed Geelong](#)

“The after effects are far-reaching. It's not only violence and personal intervention orders and so forth – it also hits out economy. People not working, people not going forward, people having miserable lives.”

Shadow police Minister David Southwick said drug related crime continued to be one of the “biggest issues” faced by the community.

He said he was concerned that recommendations – including adding a drug court – raised during a 2014 parliamentary inquiry had not been implemented.

“The biggest issue is there are not enough resources being put into rehab and people can’t get a bed when they need it,” Mr Southwick said.

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association executive officer Sam Biondo said there was “no single measure” to address the harm caused by illicit drugs and alcohol dependence.

Instead, he said authorities must look at ways to reduce harm and keep people alive.

“We need an accessible system, with minimal wait times with appropriately qualified staff,” Mr Biondo said.

“We need to be able to divert people experiencing substance dependence away from harmful law and order responses, so they can solely focus on recovery from substance dependence.”

RELATED: [Geelong ice users dying on rehab waiting lists](#)

He said stigma and discrimination in the community and embedded throughout government services must be address to ensure people were not deterred from seeking help.

Foundation 61 founder Rob Lytzki said the mental health of Geelong was heavily affected by the closure of places like Ford and Alcoa, which he believed had greatly contributed to the city’s ice scourge.

“(We must) try and build some positive outlook and industries into Geelong, be very deliberate in lifting Geelong up, get a healthier socio-economic standing, and provide the real rehab services that actually meet the person where they’re at, not just fund services that support themselves first and the people second,” Mr Lytzki said.

“It’s a whole team effort.”

But, Geelong MP Christine Couzens said the state government was addressing the problem, with the existing Victoria Budget investing a record \$314.8 million in alcohol and other drug services.

“We know ice has devastating effects on our local community every day,” she said.

“We are committed to reducing the harm associated with alcohol and drug use, which is why we have invested a record \$314.8 million in alcohol and drug services.”

She said alcohol and other drug problems in Geelong and across the state are complex, affecting not just the individual but their family, friends and their communities.

“We are tackling this problem through approaches that look at this problem first and foremost as a health issue.”

CHILLING INSIGHT REVEALS SCALE OF ICE INFLUENCE ON CRIME

A Geelong magistrate was this week dealing with a young man who had admitted selling the drug ice, when he stopped to talk about this newspaper.

“On the front page of the Geelong Advertiser on Saturday was ice problems being particularly highlighted,” he told the courtroom.

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“These are serious issues in the community, and that’s certainly my experience in the situation.”

He’s not alone. Other magistrates in recent times have described the drug as a “poison” and a “scourge in our community”.

One only needs to spend a day inside a Geelong courtroom to realise how ice plays a role in so much criminal activity within our region.

Burglaries, family violence, dangerous driving — you name it, ice contributes to all sorts of offending.

It has the power to turn decent, law-abiding citizens into prolific crooks. The Addy has seen countless examples of this over the years and, sadly, will continue to see more.

Lawyers often tell stories of clients who started dabbling in other drugs, but once it came to using ice everything changed.

Living with a drug addiction comes at a huge financial cost and leads people to commit crimes to fund their own habit.

Disturbingly, many choose to do this by selling drugs to others. Such was the case with that young man this week, who pleaded guilty to trafficking ice.

His lawyer said the teen had become hooked on the drug and was dealing it so he could feed his own addiction.

It prompted the magistrate to ask, with more than a hint of frustration: “So he’s happy to feed his drug habit by taking advantage of others?”

He didn’t get an answer.

But it’s worth noting that young man wasn’t born a drug dealer or addict.

Not so long ago, someone else introduced him to that world when they gave him his first taste of illicit substances.

Now it's him doing the same for others.

It's a tragic cycle that shows no sign of slowing down.

— RUSTY WOODGER

HOW DRUG COURT COULD SAVE CITY HOPELESSLY ADDICTED TO ICE

Prominent Geelong lawyers say a lack of rehabilitation facilities mean jail is often the only treatment option available to offenders hopelessly addicted to ice.

Michael Brugman, of Criminal Lawyers Geelong, said the state's legal system must be reformed to better support drug-addicted offenders to access treatment programs to help turn lives around.

He said instating a 2014 parliamentary inquiry recommendation to investigate creating a drug court in Geelong would be a step in the right direction to solving the scourge of ice.

But, Mr Brugman said the real key to ending the crisis was funding and developing public rehabilitation centres.

"Ice is really addictive and there is hardly anywhere that people can go to get help," he said.

"People need professional support, 99 per cent of the time, to get off the ice."

Instead, he said offenders were remanded to "dry out" for a few days.



 A drug court is needed in Geelong, lawyers say. Picture: Alan Barber

"They lose their sense of reality, they start behaving in ways that medical professionals call drug-induced psychosis," Mr Brugman said.

"They get knocked back from getting into mental health (facilities) and end up in jail."

He said the connection between drug and crime in the region was an endless cycle.

“(They) just (end up) being released on to the streets of Geelong with nowhere to live, with a drug addiction that hasn’t been treated properly.

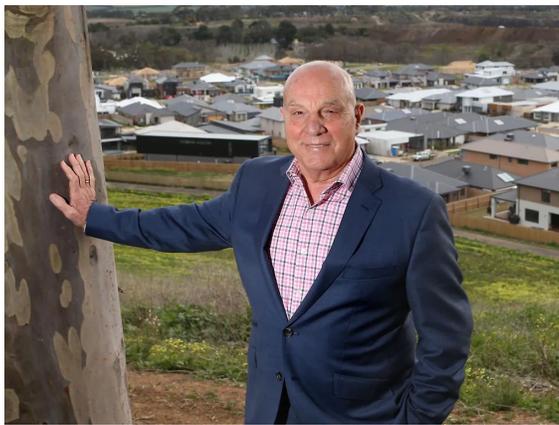
“It just makes me despair.”

Andrew Senia of Senia Lawyers, echoed his colleague’s support for a Geelong-based drug court and focus on rehabilitation for ice users.

“There’s no doubt about it, Geelong’s got a terrible ice problem,” Mr Senia said.

“It’s such a big problem it deserves special attention. And of course a drug court specialises in that area ... with a view of not only dealing with that problem as it is, but easing it in the future and rehabilitating those that need help.

“It’s not enough to just say ‘we’ve got an ice problem’, you’ve got to do something about it. And I don’t see enough being done about it.”



 Andrew Senia. Picture: Glenn Ferguson

Mr Brugman said the connection between mental health and drug addiction was also strong, with many addicts using methamphetamines to mask other illnesses.

He called for a Geelong-based drug court pilot program to ensure ice addicts could receive wrap around support when sentenced.

Mr Brugman said investment in beds, rehabilitation facilities and key changes to the bail act to ensure more offenders can be remanded to treatment programs should be priority issues.

He said amendments to the sentencing act to include mandatory rehabilitation in sentencing could also lead to a reduction in recidivism among offenders.

Victoria Legal Aid regional managing lawyer Shelley Buchecker said many Greater Geelong clients who used ice also lived with mental health issues.

Ms Buchecker said Legal Aid supported increased access to specialist therapeutic or problem-solving courts, including the drug court, assessment and referral court, Koori Court and the Neighbourhood Justice Centre.

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“These courts provide people with the time and intensive support from a range of support services to address underlying issues that may be contributing to their offending, including drug use,” Ms Buchecker said

“If people are supported to identify and address these issues, it helps to reduce the likelihood of them reoffending.”

She welcomed a key recommendation from the final report from Royal Commission into

Victoria’s Mental Health System for the Assessment and Referral Court (ARC) to be expanded to all 12 headquarter Magistrates’ Courts in Victoria, including Geelong.

Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes would not say if a drug court would soon be established in Geelong, but said the Victorian Government was investing in therapeutic courts across the state.

“We know that drug courts work – they reduce recidivism, support rehabilitation and help offenders get their lives back on track,” she said.

Its understood further expansion of drug courts will be informed by evaluation of the existing and new sites, as well as consultation with communities and key stakeholders.

—**Olivia Shying and Harrison Tippet**

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