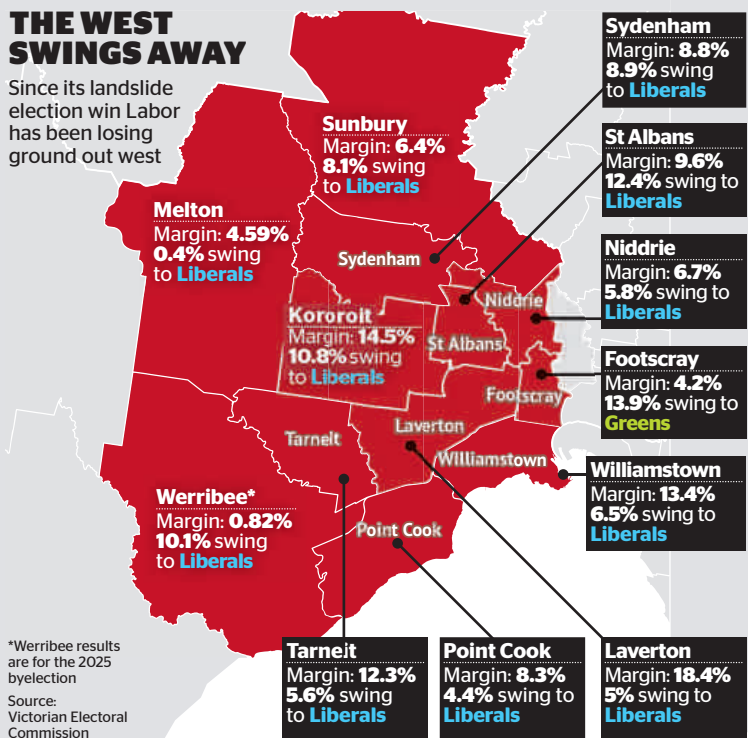


# but Libs not option

## THE WEST SWINGS AWAY

Since its landslide election win Labor has been losing ground out west



Surjeet Dogra Dhanji: Werribee, Point Cook, Hoppers Crossing and Melton have the fastest-growing Indian communities, and Paul Hopper who ran as an independent in the by-election. Photos: Wayne Taylor, Luis Enrique Asculi



infrastructure dominated the area. At the last election, he achieved a 5.6 per cent swing, but Labor held the seat with a 12 per cent margin. "At the moment, the No. 1 issue has been crime. People are scared, how can they feel safe in their own home?"

As a member of the growing Indian diaspora in Melbourne's west, he said that people from multicultural backgrounds needed to be given greater chances to

represent their communities.

### The demographic handbrake

Surjeet Dogra Dhanji, a University of Melbourne academic who studies the Indian diaspora, said concerns about anti-immigration sentiment on social media and recent right-wing protests were top-of-mind for many community members in Melbourne's west and

affected how they voted at any level.

"Making migrants the scapegoat for the housing crisis has really upset the Indian diaspora, and they are not going to take this lying down," Dhanji said.

These developments come after the federal election, in which then Coalition leader Peter Dutton unsuccessfully campaigned on cutting migration to help fix the housing crisis.

Dhanji said the Liberal Party and the Indian community shared values of hard work, business, property ownership and family.

But she said the Victorian Liberals' infighting, and a wariness of any anti-immigration rhetoric, favoured Labor.

She said Werribee, Point Cook, Hoppers Crossing and Melton had the fastest-growing Indian communities, attracted to greenfield housing sites.

Dhanji said locals were frustrated that Indian candidates with local support were overlooked for preselection or that others were parachuted in by the major parties.

Samaras said an influx of thousands of Indian migrants – who in Melbourne overwhelmingly voted Labor – would help the party retain its grip on the west in 2026.

But he said the western suburbs had become one of the capitals of small business in Victoria, creating an opening for Liberals.

Samaras said the view of some migrant voters that the Liberals are anti-immigration had put a handbrake on its electability. "There's a belief that 'they don't like us'," Samaras said. "It has really stung them."

The Liberals were contacted for comment.

A spokesperson for Premier Jacinta Allan said the government was firmly focused on supporting families in Melbourne's west, pointing to key infrastructure investments such as the Metro Tunnel, the West Gate Tunnel, the Melton Line upgrade and the planned rebuilding of Sunshine station.

"We've made big investments, but there's more to do," the spokesperson said.

The West of Melbourne Summit, presented by WoMEDA with The Age, will be held on October 22-23. For details go to womeda.com.au

# Drug overdoses spike in those over 40, new data shows

Madeleine Heffernan

Although pill testing and increased access to opioid dependence treatment have contributed to a decline in young people dying of drug overdoses, new data shows a troubling rise in fatal overdoses among older Australians.

The Penington Institute's annual overdose report, released today, shows 2272 people died of a drug overdose in 2023, the latest year of national data.

This equates to six people a day, making drug-induced deaths a leading cause of death across most adult age categories. Seventy-eight per cent of these deaths – a total of 1768 people – were unintentional.

"There's been a decline [in overdose deaths] since the peak in the late 2010s, but this is still the tenth straight year with over 2000 Australians dead. It's still vastly elevated compared to 2001," said Dr Jake Dizard, director of research at the Penington Institute, a public health not-for-profit.

"These deaths are preventable. If you look at things like the road toll, there's Vision Zero [a push for zero deaths and serious injuries by 2050] and a national road safety strategy. We don't have that for drugs."

The Penington Institute's *Australia's Annual Overdose Report 2025* said people under 40 years of age accounted for about half of overdose deaths at the turn of the century. Now, this age group accounts for just a quarter of fatal overdoses.

Dizard said it was difficult to pinpoint why young people were now less likely to die of a drug overdose. He said greater drug literacy, the wider distribution of opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone (which can be administered by any witness to an overdose), pill-testing programs, supervised injecting rooms and increased access to opioid dependence treatment had helped.

"Unfortunately, this [decline] has been more than made up for by the increases in the older demographics," said Dizard.

Since 2001, the greatest increase in unintentional overdose deaths was among people aged 50-59 – an increase of 305 per cent. Deaths among people aged 60 to 69 were up 179 per cent, and in the 40-49 category, deaths were up 153 per cent compared to 2001 figures.

Dizard said the rise in fatal overdoses among people aged 50 and over was partly due to the ageing of people who had become regular users of drugs in the 1990s and 2000s. Another factor was a rise in prescriptions for drugs such as antidepressants, benzodiazepines and opioids. "Overall, there's a very significant rise in the number of prescriptions across lots of different types of drug groups, and that does correlate with that rise in deaths, including in older people," he said.

The institute is calling for the establishment of a national body to eliminate drug overdoses, the legalisation of cannabis, and a shift in

funding from "ineffective law enforcement" to drug education and overdose prevention.

But the federal government said it provided "substantial investment into a broad range of programs and activities aimed at minimising the harms associated with alcohol and other drug use in Australia", including listing opioid dependence treatment medicines on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Australian governments spend about \$5.45 billion on proactive responses to illicit drugs, including \$3.5 billion on law enforcement responses, a report by the Drug Policy Modelling Program found. The report said most overdose deaths were the result of using more than one drug or drug type, including alcohol, at the same time or consecutively. The report found alcohol contributed to 18.4 per cent of unintentional drug-induced deaths in 2023, while antidepressants contributed to 16.9 per cent.

Dizard said in the five years between 2019 and 2023, there were 580 unintentional overdose deaths where antidepressants were the sole drug consumed, representing a tiny proportion of total antidepress-



## Drug overdoses were much more common among men, disadvantaged people and Indigenous people.

ant use. In 2022-2023, 3.7 million Australians were prescribed antidepressants via the PBS.

The report also found that stimulants such as amphetamines and MDMA had overtaken benzodiazepines as the second most common drug group involved in unintentional overdose deaths, contributing to one-third of fatal overdoses in 2023. Opioids remained the single biggest driver of deaths.

Drug overdoses were much more common among men, disadvantaged people and Indigenous people, the report found. The Department of Health, Disability and Ageing said the federal government was "committed to working with states and territories to ensure future work remains focused on reducing the harms associated with illicit drugs, including overdoses".

A spokesperson for the Victorian government said it was "reducing drug harms in our community through pill testing, naloxone vending machines and expanding access to pharmacotherapy".

# the vibe' may soon be gone

tion in special events [is] declining," a spokesperson said.

The Age spent an hour at the pop-up park on a cool but sunny afternoon last week, speaking with passersby and restaurant owners.

Mostly empty at first, the park's brightly coloured seats and tables soon filled with workers eating lunch and gaggles of students.

Most expressed a preference for keeping the street as is.

"I love it, I come here and sit for lunch every day when the sun is out," said worker Bianca Schache.

Ashok Bibra said the pop-up park "brought the vibe into the area", and

that reopening the road "would be a disaster".

Andy Wildey, who described himself as "probably the only middle-aged white guy in Point Cook", said the precinct had succeeded in knitting together people from many ethnic backgrounds.

"It just makes a community.

"I can imagine it would just fill up with Uber drivers doing pick-ups and drop-offs and just being a horrible, very busy little bit of road," he said of the proposed reopening.

A restaurateur who didn't want to be named for fear of backlash disagreed, saying the pop-up park was

usually empty in cooler weather and did not bring in customers. The pop-up park was piloted in 2018, inspired by the pedestrianisation of Ballarat Street in Yarraville.

Events at the Point Cook park have been managed by CoLocal since 2018, which has chosen to step away.

CoLocal founder Sara Mitchell said Stockland's statement that the precinct was minimally used was "incredibly disingenuous".

"It's the polar opposite to what we know from what we're measuring and on our lived experience," Mitchell said.