

DRUG TRENDS BULLETIN

KEY POINTS

The IDRS detected the following major trends in the period 1996-2000:

1. *Heroin*. The price of heroin declined markedly in NSW and VIC from 1997 onwards, while purity increased in other jurisdictions to match the levels found, in the early years of the IDRS, only in NSW. All indicators point to an increase in the number of heroin users between 1996 and 2000.
2. *Cocaine*. Cocaine use among heroin injectors increased substantially in Sydney from 1998 onwards, but remained at low levels elsewhere. The price of cocaine fell in Sydney as availability and use of the drug increased. Cocaine purity increased between 1996 and 2000.
3. *Amphetamine*. Amphetamine prices have remained stable between 1996 and 2000, although there are large regional variations. Purity of amphetamine seizures has increased since 1996. There has been a recent substantial increase in the use of a crystalline form of methamphetamine ("ice"), sold in "points", or 0.1 gram amounts, for \$50.
4. *Cannabis*. Cannabis was cheapest in SA in all years of the IDRS. Prices fell in NSW, VIC and SA between 1996 and 2000. Potency was rated high in all years. Between 1996 and 2000, there appears to have been an increase in the number of cannabis users, and an earlier initiation into cannabis use.

IDRS

Illicit Drug Reporting System

APRIL
2001
SUPPLEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) has operated for five years, having begun in NSW in 1996. This Supplementary *Drug Trends Bulletin* briefly presents the major trends detected in the markets for the four main illicit drug classes by the IDRS over the period 1996-2000. See Darke et al¹ for full details of the history and methodology of the IDRS, and the major trends documented over this period.

Heroin

Price

Figure 1 presents IDU estimates of the price of a gram of heroin in the three jurisdictions (NSW, VIC, and SA) in which IDU surveys have been conducted over a number of years. There were marked declines in the price of heroin in NSW and VIC, commencing in 1997. In NSW the price of a gram of heroin halved from \$400 a gram in 1996 to \$220 a gram in 2000. A similar trend was detected in VIC. In contrast, in SA the price of heroin remained stable until 2000, when it showed a sharp decline.

In 2000, heroin was still often purchased in "caps" in many jurisdictions (a small amount typically used for a single injection). These were also cheaper in NSW (\$20-25), compared to \$50 in other jurisdictions. In 2000, heroin was most expensive in the NT (\$600 per gram).

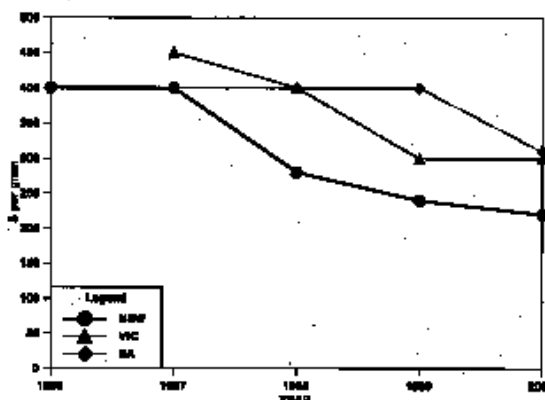


Figure 1: IDU estimates of heroin price per gram, 1996-2000

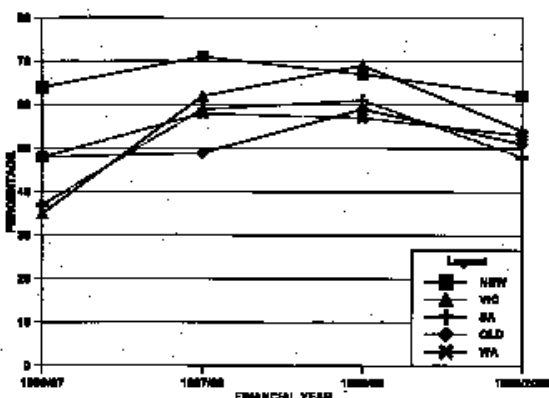
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Purity

In 1996/97, average purity levels of over 50% were found only in NSW. Across the years of the IDRS, heroin purity increased in other jurisdictions to levels similar to that found in NSW (Figure 2), suggesting a diffusion of heroin distribution across Australia.

Figure 2: Mean purity of heroin seizures analysed in Australia by jurisdiction, 1996/97-1999/2000



Availability and use

The number of heroin users in Australia appeared to increase between 1996 and 2000, particularly in NSW and VIC. IDU and key informants reported increases in the number of heroin users. The number of arrests for narcotic possession in Australia, the number of opioid-related deaths, and the number of patients enrolled in methadone maintenance increased substantially over the period of the IDRS. Earlier initiation into injecting was noted from the IDU surveys, key informant reports, and analyses of the National Household Survey². More recent initiates reported that heroin was the first drug injected, whereas approximately one half of older heroin users reported that amphetamine was the first drug injected. These results were consistent with the Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey³.

Cocaine

Price

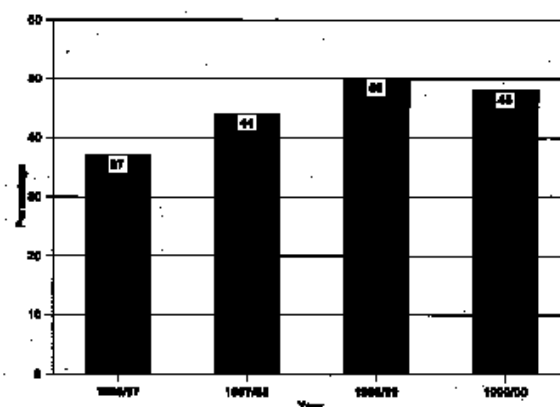
The price of cocaine was lowest in Sydney over the years of the IDRS. Although the price per gram of cocaine remained stable in Sydney over this time (\$200 per gram), the price of "caps" fell from \$80 to \$50 in 1998, and remained at the lower price in

1999 and 2000. Concurrent with the fall in cap prices in Sydney was a large increase in the availability and use of the drug. Other jurisdictions did not report the availability of cocaine caps. The price of cocaine in other jurisdictions ranged from \$250-\$300 per gram. Few IDU or key informants outside NSW were able to comment on the price of cocaine, indicating low rates of exposure to the drug.

Purity

The average purity of cocaine seizures in Australia increased over the years of the IDRS (Figure 3). There were no meaningful differences in the purity of seizures between jurisdictions.

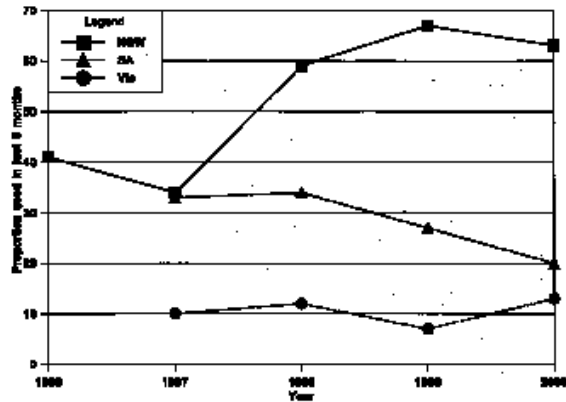
Figure 3: Purity of cocaine seizures analysed in Australia, 1996/97-1999/00



Availability and use

There was a marked increase in 1998 in the reported recent use of cocaine among IDU in Sydney (Figure 4). This was not noted in other jurisdictions, all of which described cocaine use as uncommon. Since 1998, cocaine use among IDU in Sydney appears to have stabilised at higher levels of use. The IDU surveys conducted in 2000 for the first time in jurisdictions other than NSW, VIC and SA, confirmed these trends. The Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey also indicated an increase in the prevalence of cocaine injection in NSW³, as did the number of arrests for cocaine use and/or possession. The major increase in cocaine use that occurred in Sydney was primarily among existing heroin users who injected combinations of heroin and cocaine, or heroin and cocaine in rapid succession⁴.

Figure 4: Cocaine use in preceding six months among IDU in the IDRS, 1996-2000



Amphetamine

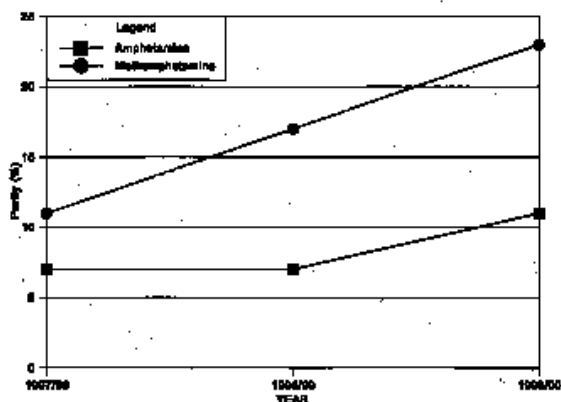
Price

The price of amphetamine remained relatively stable over the five years of the IDRS, ranging between \$50-\$100 per gram. Amphetamine was consistently more expensive in NSW (\$100 per gram) than in SA and VIC (\$50 per gram).

Purity

The purity of amphetamine increased over the period of the IDRS (Figure 5). The majority of seizures in all jurisdictions were methamphetamine, the more potent form of the drug. The proportion of total seizures that were methamphetamine (as opposed to amphetamine) has increased over recent years (1997/98 83%, 1998/99 89%, 1999/00 95%).

Figure 5: Purity of amphetamine seizures in Australia, 1997/98-1999/00

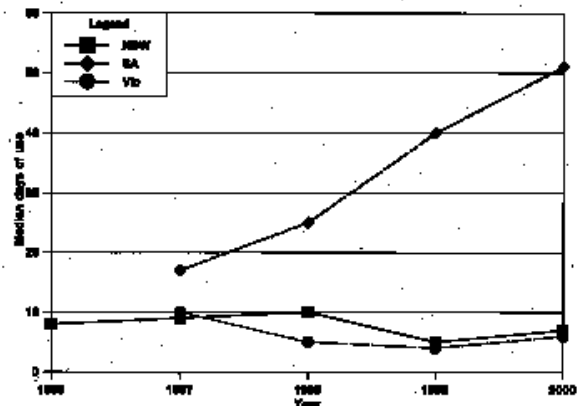


Availability and use

There appears to be large jurisdictional differences

in the use of injected amphetamine. In particular, QLD and SA reported high rates of amphetamine injecting. In contrast, states with high rates of heroin use, such as NSW and VIC, reported very low rates of amphetamine injection. There are also jurisdictional differences in frequency of amphetamine use (Figure 6), with days of amphetamine use increasing in SA over each year of the IDRS, but not in other states.

Figure 6: Median days of amphetamine use in the preceding six months by IDU, 1996-2000



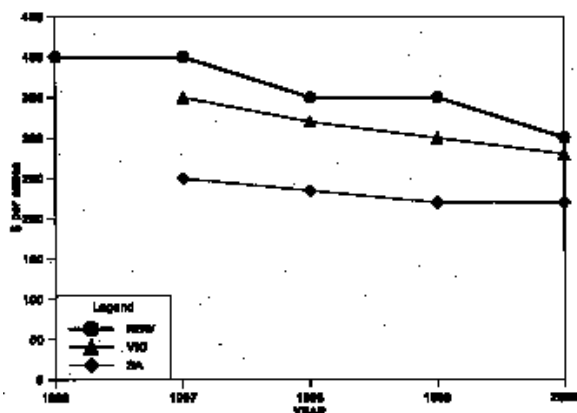
The predominant form of amphetamine currently available in Australia is methamphetamine powder. In 1999, there were reports of an increase in NSW and QLD in the use of a crystalline form of methamphetamine ("ice", "shabu", "crystal meth"). This form of amphetamine is substantially stronger than powder. It is typically smoked or injected, and is sold in 0.1 gram amounts, known as "points", for \$50. In 2000, this trend was confirmed, with the use of "ice" reported in all jurisdictions.

Cannabis

Price

The ounce price of cannabis was lower in SA than in NSW and VIC, with prices consistently \$250 or lower between 1996 and 2000 (Figure 7). Most other jurisdictions reported a median price of \$300 per ounce in 2000. Ounce prices fell in NSW, VIC and SA over the period of the IDRS. Gram purchases of cannabis were reported in all jurisdictions in all years, most commonly in the \$20-25 range. In SA, 2 gram "bags" of cannabis were sold for \$25, approximately half the price reported in other jurisdictions.

Figure 7: IDU estimates of cannabis price per ounce, 1996-2000



Potency

The THC content of cannabis seizures is not routinely tested in Australia. IDU and key informants in all jurisdictions, however, rated the potency of cannabis as high in all years.

Availability and use

IDU and key informants in all jurisdictions and in all years consistently reported that cannabis is very easy to obtain, and commented on an increase in the number of younger cannabis users. Consistent with these observations, comparison of the 1998 and 1995 NDS Household Survey shows increases in population lifetime and recent cannabis use⁵. This is also consistent with data indicating that the age of initiation into cannabis use has fallen in recent years⁶. Cannabis use was primarily of the more potent "heads", in all years and in all jurisdictions. This represents a long term change in the form of cannabis smoked in Australia, as in past decades the smoking of the less potent cannabis leaf predominated. There have been only small increases in cannabis potency since the 1970s⁷.

References

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