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Key Points

- The IDRS and PDI studies target distinct sentinel groups of illicit drug users. Accordingly, the two samples differ markedly in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.
- Findings from the 2005 Victorian IDRS and PDI studies suggest that the use of methamphetamine, particularly speed, is widespread amongst both injecting drug users and regular ecstasy users in Melbourne.
- Frequency of use was comparable across the two studies, with participants tending to report using methamphetamine powder (speed) between once a month and once a fortnight.
- Prices paid for the three forms of methamphetamine (speed, base and crystal meth) were comparable across the two studies, and were reported to have been stable during the past six months. Crystal methamphetamine was reported to be the most expensive of the three forms by participants in both the IDRS and PDI.
- The overwhelming majority of both IDRS and PDI participants reported that speed was 'very easy' to 'easy' to access in Melbourne, and that availability had been stable.
- Consistent with Victoria Police seizure data, reports of the purity of speed varied in both the IDRS and PDI samples.
- These findings indicate that, despite differences between the groups in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and drug preferences (eg. drug of choice and route of administration), reports around methamphetamine related market experiences (price, purity and availability) and use patterns (prevalence and frequency of use) are strikingly similar.
- These findings may suggest that the illicit drug markets accessed by these two groups of drug users are less distinct than previously assumed. This issue warrants further consideration and examination, given the possible implications for public health (eg. transition to injecting as a route of administration).

Methamphetamine Use in Melbourne

Australia's Drug Trend Monitoring Systems: the IDRS and PDI studies

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is a national study conducted in the capital city of each jurisdiction in Australia. The aim of the study is to monitor emerging trends related to the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. Drug trends are monitored in every jurisdiction through: (1) a survey with a sentinel group of injecting drug users; (2) a survey of key experts in the field of illicit drugs and (3) an analysis of indicator data.

The Party Drugs Initiative (PDI) uses a comparable methodology to monitor ecstasy and related drug (ERD: i.e., methamphetamine, cocaine, GHB and ketamine) trends across Australia. The PDI methodology consists of (1) a survey with a sentinel group of regular ecstasy users; (2) a survey of key experts in the field of ERDs, and (3) an analysis of indicator data.

Both the IDRS and PDI studies collect information on methamphetamine markets and use patterns. This bulletin presents a comparison of the Victorian 2005 IDRS and PDI findings on methamphetamine patterns of use, price, availability and purity.

Characteristics of the Victorian 2005 IDRS and PDI samples

In 2005, 150 current injecting drug users (IDU) and 100 regular ecstasy users (REU) participated in the Victorian IDRS and PDI studies respectively. Characteristics of the two samples are presented in Table 1. The two samples differed in terms of most of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics examined. The most notable differences between the two samples included: 1) age (the PDI sample tended to be younger); 2) accommodation status (over one third of IDRS participants reported living in a boarding house, shelter or having no fixed address, while most PDI participants were securely accommodated either living in their own house or with their parents); 3) employment status (the majority of the IDRS participants were unemployed, compared to the majority of the PDI participants who were employed); 4) current involvement in drug treatment (over one third of IDRS participants were in some form of drug treatment, compared to none of the PDI participants); and 5) prison history (of which approximately half of the IDRS sample reported, compared to a small proportion of PDI participants).

Table 1: Characteristics of the 2005 Victorian IDRS and PDI samples

Characteristic	IDRS N=150	PDI N=100
Mean age in years (range)	31 (range 20 to 49)	24 (range 17 to 45)
Sex (% male)	60	52
Accommodation:		
Own house / flat (includes renting) (%)	43	66
Parents house (%)	17	27
Boarding house / hostel (%)	27	0
Shelter/ refuge (%)	3	0
No fixed address / homeless (%)	5	0
Employment:		
Not employed (%)	81	15
Full time (%)	8	33
Part time/casual (%)	5	34
Home Duties (%)	4	0
Student (full-time) (%)	1	17
English speaking background (%)	94	94
ATSI (%)	6	2
Mean number of years of school education	10	12
Tertiary education:		
None (%)	47	48
Trade/technical (%)	47	27
University/college (%)	7	25
Currently in drug treatment (%)	40	0
Prison history (%)	53	4

Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2005

Patterns of methamphetamine use

Methamphetamine is a synthetic stimulant that works by stimulating the release of various neurotransmitters (dopamine, noradrenaline, adrenaline and serotonin) that increase central nervous system activity (Topp and Churchill 2002). The three forms of methamphetamine currently available in Australia include methamphetamine powder ('speed'), base methamphetamine ('base') and crystalline methamphetamine ('crystal meth' or 'ice') (Topp, et al. 2002).

Methamphetamine powder ('speed')

As presented in Table 2, speed was the most widely used form of methamphetamine, with the majority of both the IDRS and PDI participants reporting lifetime and recent (last six months) use of speed. The patterns of speed use were also comparable, with both samples tending to report using speed between monthly and fortnightly. Further, similar proportions of the samples reported speed as their main drug of choice.

Table 2: Patterns of speed use among 2005 Victorian IDRS and PDI samples

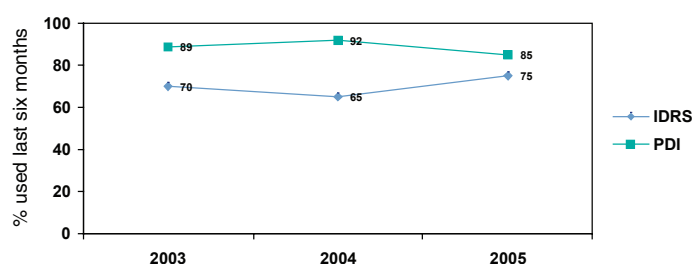
	Victorian IDRS (N=150)	Victorian PDI (N=100)
Ever used (%)	97	97
Used preceding six months (%)	75	85
Median days used last 6 months (of those who had used in last 6 months)	7 (range 1-180) (n=113)	10 (range 1-80) (n=85)
Main drug of choice (%)	11	12
Injecting by recent speed users (%)	95	12
Snorting by recent speed users (%)	13	91

Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2005

As may be expected, given the socio-demography of the sentinel groups of interest, there were notable differences in terms of mode of administration reported by the samples: participants from the IDRS reporting recent use of speed most commonly injected it and those from the PDI most commonly snorted it.

Figure 1 illustrates that the proportion of IDRS and PDI participants reporting recent use of speed over the past three years has been relatively stable.

Figure 1: Proportion of IDU & REU reporting speed use in the past six months, 2003–2005



Source: Vic IDRS & PDI interviews, 2003-2005

Base Methamphetamine ('base')

As presented in Table 3, relatively small numbers of IDRS and PDI participants reported lifetime and recent use of base. There were considerable differences between the two samples in terms of frequency of recent use however, with the IDRS participants reporting approximately fortnightly use and the PDI sample reporting approximately bi-monthly use.

Table 3: Patterns of base use among 2005 Victorian IDRS and PDI samples

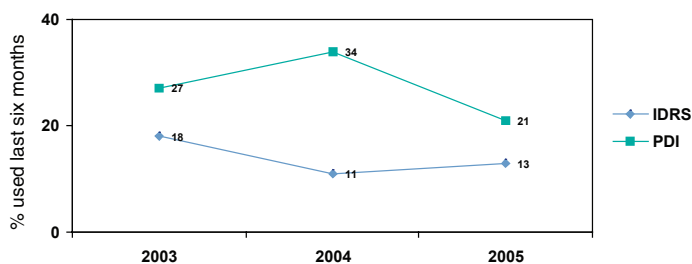
	IDRS (N=150)	PDI (N=100)
Ever used (%)	28	34
Used preceding six months (%)	13	21
Median days used last 6 months (of those who had used in last 6 months)	10 (1-100) (n=19)	3 (range 1-70) (n=21)
Main drug of choice (%)	1	1
Injecting by recent base users (%)	100	24
Swallowing by recent base users (%)	5	81

Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2005

Again, there were differences in terms of mode of administration: all IDU who reported using base in the past six months reported that they had injected the drug during that time, and the majority of REU participants who reported recent use of base had swallowed it.

Figure 2 illustrates that small proportions of IDRS and PDI samples have reported recent base use across the past three years.

Figure 2: Proportion of IDU & REU reporting base use in the past six months, 2003–2005



Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2003-2005

Crystal Methamphetamine ('ice' or 'crystal meth')

Comparable proportions of the IDRS and PDI samples reported lifetime use of crystal meth, although a higher proportion of the PDI sample reported recent use (Table 4). Frequency of use of crystal meth was comparable across samples, with users tending to report relatively infrequent (i.e., less than monthly) use.

Table 4: Patterns of crystal meth use among 2005 Victorian IDRS and PDI samples

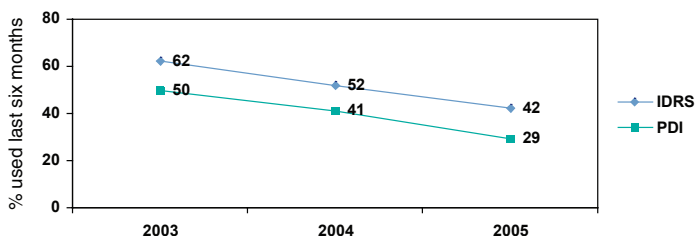
	IDRS (N=150)	PDI (N=100)
Ever used (%)	64	71
Used preceding six months (%)	29	42
Median days used last 6 months (of those who had used in last 6 months)	4 (range 1-60) (n=42)	4.5 (range 1-100) (n=42)
Main drug of choice (%)	1	7
Injecting by recent crystal meth users (%)	88	12
Smoking by recent crystal meth users (%)	48	83

Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2005

Again, the mode of administration reported by the two samples differed, with the IDU sample most commonly reporting injecting crystal meth, and the PDI sample most commonly reporting smoking it.

Figure 3 illustrates that levels of recent use reported by both IDRS and PDI participants have decreased at comparable rates since 2003.

Figure 3: Proportion of IDU & REU reporting crystal meth use in the past six months, 2003–2005



Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2005

Methamphetamine price

The median price (and price range) paid for the three forms of methamphetamine (i.e. speed, base and crystal meth) by Melbourne IDU and REU on the last occasion of purchase are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Price of most recent methamphetamine purchases by IDRS & PDI participants, 2005

Amount	IDRS median price (range)	IDRS number of purchasers	PDI median price (range)	PDI number of purchasers
<i>Speed</i>				
Gram	\$200 (\$100-\$250)	23	\$180 (\$100-\$300)	29
Half gram	\$100 (\$70-\$180)	36	\$95(\$50-\$130)	14
Point (0.1 gram)	\$40 (\$20-\$50)	33	\$30 (\$18-\$30)	15
<i>Base</i>				
Gram	\$150 (\$100-\$300)	3	\$200	1
Point (0.1 gram)	\$45 (\$40-\$50)	2	\$25 (\$25-\$25)	2
<i>Ice</i>				
Gram	\$300 (\$180-\$400)	4	\$300 (\$90-\$350)	6
Point (0.1 gram)	\$50 (\$40-\$50)	5	\$40 (\$25-\$40)	3

Source: Victorian IDRS & PDI interviews, 2005

Prices paid by the two samples for speed, the most commonly used and purchased form of methamphetamine, are similar. Although only small numbers of participants were able to comment on the price of base and crystal meth, prices paid for base are reportedly comparable to those paid for speed, with crystal meth reported to be the most expensive form of methamphetamine. These findings must be considered with caution, however, given the small numbers of participants able to comment.

Most IDRS and PDI respondents reported that prices of the three forms of methamphetamine had been stable over the six months prior to interview, although again only small numbers were able to comment on the price of base and crystal meth.

Methamphetamine availability

Reports of speed availability were comparable for the IDRS and PDI samples, with the majority of participants reporting that it was 'very easy' (45% and 49%, respectively) or 'easy' (35% and 42%, respectively) to access, and that availability had recently been stable (69% and 77%, respectively). In terms of sources of speed, most participants in both samples reported scoring from friends or known dealers.

Due to the relatively small numbers of participants who were able to comment the availability of base and crystal meth, data on these forms of methamphetamine is not presented here. For further information about the availability of base and crystal meth please see the forthcoming Victorian IDRS and PDI reports.

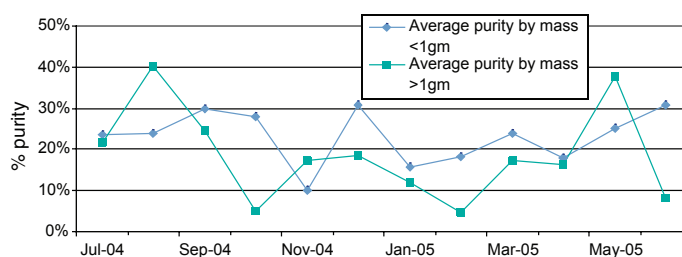
Methamphetamine purity

Reports of speed purity were variable both within and across the two studies. Most IDU reported that speed was of low (29%) or medium (32%) purity, while REU reported the current purity of speed was medium (30%) or high (35%). Reports of recent changes in speed purity were also variable, although approximately one quarter of both the IDRS (24%) and PDI (24%) participants reported the purity of speed as having recently fluctuated.

Due to the relatively small numbers of participants who were able to comment the purity of base and crystal meth, data on these forms of methamphetamine is not presented here. For further information about the purity of base and crystal meth please see the forthcoming Victorian IDRS and PDI reports.

Consistent with IDU and REU reports of fluctuating speed purity, Victoria Police data reflects the variability in the purity of methamphetamine seizures. The mean purity of <1gm and >1gm methamphetamine seizures by law enforcement agencies in Victoria during the 2004/2005 financial year is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Average purity of methamphetamine seizures by Victorian law enforcement, July 2004 – June 2005



Source: Victoria Police Forensic Services Department.

Summary of methamphetamine use in Melbourne, Victoria

The differences between the IDRS and PDI samples in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics reflect the distinct sentinel groups of illicit drug users which are the focus of these studies. The findings from the 2005 Victorian studies suggest, however, that the use of methamphetamine, particularly speed, is widespread amongst both IDU and REU in Melbourne.

Across both studies, the prevalence of reported recent use of speed and base remained relatively stable between 2003 and 2005, while the reported use of crystal meth declined over this period of time. Frequencies of speed and crystal meth use were comparable, with both IDRS and PDI participants reporting using speed between once a month and once a fortnight and crystal meth less than monthly. The IDRS participants reported more frequent recent use of base (approximately fortnightly compared to approximately bi-monthly use).

Prices paid for the three forms of methamphetamine were similar across the two studies, with crystal meth reported as the most expensive of the three forms by both IDU and REU.

The majority of both IDRS and PDI participants reported that speed was 'very easy' to 'easy' to access, and that availability had been stable over the last six months. Most participants in both studies reported sourcing speed through friends or known dealers.

Consistent with Victoria Police methamphetamine seizure data, the reports of both the IDRS and PDI samples regarding the purity of speed were variable, with most also reporting speed purity as having recently fluctuated.

In summary, despite differences between the groups in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and drug preferences (e.g. drug of choice and route of administration), reports around methamphetamine markets (price, purity and availability) and use patterns (prevalence and frequency of use) are strikingly similar. These findings may reflect that the illicit drug markets accessed by these two groups of drug users are less distinct than previously assumed, or rather that markets accessed by the groups are distinct yet comparable (i.e., in terms of price, purity and availability). This issue warrants further consideration and examination, given the possible implications for public health (i.e., injecting route of administration transfer to non-injectors).

References

- Topp, L., & Churchill, A. (2002). *Australia's Dynamic Methamphetamine Markets* (Drug Trends Bulletin). Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre.
- Topp, L., Degenhardt, L., Kaye, S., & Darke, S. (2002). The emergence of potent forms of methamphetamine in Sydney, Australia: a case study of the IDRS as a strategic early warning system. *Drug & Alcohol Review*, 21(4), 341-348.

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