



NATIONAL DRUG AND
ALCOHOL RESEARCH CENTRE

HAS THE HEROIN MARKET SHRUNK?

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It appears that some users left the heroin market due to the shortage of the drug in 2001. Some of these users may have not returned to heroin use suggesting that the market is not as big as it once was, according to research released today.

These are the findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), a research project co-ordinated by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund. The IDRS monitors the price, purity, availability and use of the four main illicit drug types – heroin, amphetamine, cocaine and cannabis.

To provide timely information on emerging illicit drug trends, interviews are carried out with people who regularly inject drugs, and with professionals in drug-related fields. The results of these interviews are compared with trends observed in other indicators of drug use, such as drug seizures, overdoses, arrests and treatment numbers.

This year, indicator data in NSW suggests that there do not appear to be as many heroin users in the state. However, among this smaller group of injecting drug users interviewed in NSW, some heroin users had returned to daily use of the drug. This finding is in contrast to markets such as Victoria and the ACT, where the heroin shortage from last year appears to have had a continued effect on heroin users' frequency of use.

Dr Louisa Degenhardt from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, and Chief Investigator of the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), believes the project results are very different from previous years.

“The picture of exactly what is now happening in Australian drug markets is not as clear as it has been in past years, primarily because of differences across the jurisdictions as opposed to more national trends”, said Dr Degenhardt. “This could be due to the major disruptions caused by the heroin shortage, and perhaps that it is only now that injecting drug users are starting to return to previous patterns of use.”

“Our interviews with current injecting drug users across all jurisdictions, together with other data sources such as number of overdoses, both fatal and non-fatal,

confirm that there do not appear to be as many heroin-related problems across Australia as in previous years,” said Dr Degenhardt.

The methamphetamine market is still one in which it is proving difficult to identify clear trends. Last year it was reported that as heroin became less pure and more difficult to obtain, many users switched to another drug. However, conference delegates were told today that although large proportions of drug users in South Australia and Western Australia still use methamphetamine, or ‘speed’ as it is also known, overall, users are reporting using that drug less frequently than last year.

“There continue to be many different forms of methamphetamine available and users have many different names for the same substance,” said Dr Degenhardt. “Purity levels vary dramatically and as a result it is proving difficult to provide good information to users of the drug.”

There was a new change in the cannabis market, with a drop in price of an ounce of the drug being reported across the country. Cannabis continues to be easy to obtain and widely used in all areas. Once again, hydroponically grown cannabis was the most commonly reported form of cannabis used.

The IDRS continues to provide valuable information on current drug trends across Australia.

“The major benefit of the IDRS is that we can now detect new drug trends as they are emerging – it provides an early warning for governments, law enforcement and health workers,” said Dr Degenhardt. “Without a system designed to detect new trends, we are always playing catch-up with major problems.”

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