



NATIONAL DRUG AND  
ALCOHOL RESEARCH CENTRE

## **NEW NATIONAL STUDY SHOWS HOW THE AUSTRALIAN DRUG MARKET HAS RESPONDED TO THE HEROIN DROUGHT**

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For the first time since the 'heroin drought' began late last year, we now have a good understanding of how the Australian drug market has responded to the dramatic changes that have occurred in the past 12 months.

According to latest research released today, as heroin has become less pure and more difficult to obtain, many users have simply switched to another drug. As a result amphetamines, or 'speed' as it is also known, which has become more potent and more widely available over the past 12 months, is used more regularly by many Australian drug users.

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is a research project co-ordinated by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 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 achieve this, interviews with people who regularly inject drugs and professionals in drug-related fields are carried out, as well as an examination of existing indicators of drug use (e.g. data from police seizures).

Dr Libby Topp from NDARC, National Co-ordinator of the IDRS, believes the trend towards the use of crystalline methamphetamine (known on the street as 'ice' or 'shabu'), which was identified in last year's study, has become an even greater problem in 2001.

"More people are using methamphetamine and the drug continues to be available under a variety of different guises," said Dr Topp. "The drug is readily available right across the country and attracting younger users. As the purity and availability of heroin has dropped – just the opposite has occurred in the methamphetamine market. It really does appear to have filled a hole in the drug market."

International research indicates that the widespread use of crystalline methamphetamine is likely to be associated with adverse psychological effects such as paranoia, anxiety, depression and even psychotic breakdown.

There are also community problems associated with a drug such as methamphetamine.

“There have been reports from some states, particularly Queensland, of increases in violence and property crime,” warned Dr Topp. “More presentations from methamphetamine users to Accident and Emergency Departments have also been reported, as well as more attendances by paramedics to users who are difficult to manage due to their psychotic or violent behaviour.”

Apart from methamphetamine, different states have responded differently to the change in the heroin market. Both legal and illegal drugs have been substituted for heroin, or used to supplement the less pure form of the drug.

Cocaine was identified in NSW, the ACT, Queensland and Victoria and the increased injection of benzodiazepines (such as Valium or Normison) was noted in South Australia and Victoria.

Australia’s heroin drought is totally unique; never before has a modern western drug market experienced such a marked reduction in the supply of heroin, and at the present time only Australia is experiencing the shortage.

“There have undoubtedly been a number of positive consequences of the drought, notably a significant decrease in the number of heroin overdoses and some people who have stopped using drugs altogether, either by themselves or with the help of treatment,” said Dr Topp.

“However, there have also been unintended consequences. We already know that illicit drug users do not stick to one drug type. This study has proven that the boundaries between different drug markets are very blurred, with users shifting between drugs with ease.”

“This has enormous implications for both the law enforcement and health sectors,” concluded Dr Topp. “The major benefit of the IDRS is that we can now detect new drug trends as they are emerging – it is our alarm bell. Without a system designed to detect new trends, we are always playing catch-up with major problems.”

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Table 1. Median price of last IDU purchase and purity of heroin by jurisdiction

HEROIN		PRICE (\$) 2001		PRICE (\$) 2000		PURITY* %
		Gram	Cap	Gram	Cap	
	NSW	320	50	220	25	51 (62)
SA	350	50	310	50	45 (48)	
VIC	450	50	300	50	46 (54)	
ACT	485	50	300	50	40 (54)	
WA	750	50	450	50	49 (53)	
QLD	450	50	350	50	39 (51)	
TAS	325	50	375	50	ns (75)	
NT	600	90	600	50	42 (ns)	

\* 2000 purity in brackets  
ns: no seizures analysed

Table 2. Median price of last IDU purchase and purity of methamphetamine by jurisdiction

METHAMPHETAMINE		PRICE (\$) 2001		PRICE (\$) 2000		PURITY* %
		Gram	Point	Gram	Point #	
	NSW	100	50	90		12 (15)
SA	50	30	50		15 (17)	
VIC	200	50	50		24 (16)	
ACT	250	50	180		12 (10)	
WA	250	50	200		23 (23)	
QLD	180	35	80		29 (28)	
TAS	90	70	80		6 (7)	
NT	80	50	80		11 (5)	

\* 2000 purity in brackets  
# comparable data not collected in 2000

Table 3. Median price of last IDU purchase and purity of cocaine by jurisdiction

COCAINE		PRICE (\$) 2001		PRICE (\$) 2000		PURITY* %
		Gram	Cap	Gram	Cap	
		NSW	200	50	200	
SA	200	50	300	-	61 (ns)	
VIC	225	100	250	-	65 (47)	
ACT	165	50	170	-	36 (26)	
WA	300	-	250	-	33 (34)	
QLD	200	80	250	-	59 (51)	
TAS	450	-	300	-	45 (ns)	
NT	-	-	250	-	ns (ns)	

\* 2000 purity in brackets

ns: no seizures analysed

Note: Dashes represent no purchases of stated amount

Table 4. Median price of last IDU purchase and potency of cannabis by jurisdiction

CANNABIS		PRICE (\$) 2001		PRICE (\$) 2000		POTENCY 2001
		Gram	Ounce	Gram	Ounce	
		NSW	20	320	20	
SA	25*	200	25*	220	High	
VIC	20	250	20	280	High	
ACT	20	280	25	300	High	
WA	25	250	25	300	High	
QLD	25	320	25	300	High	
TAS	25**	280	25	300	High	
NT	25	300	25	300s	Med-High	

\* approximately 2 grams

\*\* approximately 1.5 grams

## **TRENDS BY STATE AND TERRITORY:**

### **NSW**

- Heroin –** availability and use decreased dramatically, price up, purity down
- Cocaine –** more people using more often due to heroin shortage
- Methamphetamine –** more people using, more varieties available, stronger more potent forms easier to get

### **VICTORIA**

- Heroin –** less available, costs more and less pure
- Cocaine –** preliminary evidence of an increase in cocaine injection among Melbourne injecting drug users (further investigation required to verify)
- Methamphetamine –** increased availability and frequency of use of more potent and higher cost forms
- Benzodiazepines –** consolidation of temazepam capsule injection by some injecting drug users

### **QUEENSLAND**

- Heroin –** use decreasing leading to a shift to other drugs, price increased and purity decreased
- Methamphetamine –** more people using and demand increasing due to heroin drought, purity high and increasing, availability high
- Benzodiazepines –** increased injection of benzodiazepines by some injecting drug users

### **SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

- Heroin –** availability and frequency of use has decreased, increase in price and decrease in purity
- Methamphetamine –** more people using, increase in younger users, increase in use and availability of stronger forms that are easier to obtain

### **WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

- Heroin –** availability down, price increased, reduction in heroin-related overdoses and a shift to the use of other drugs
- Methamphetamine –** continued high availability and use of more potent forms, widespread use and an increase in the number of users

### **AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

- Heroin –** availability becoming more difficult, used decreased dramatically, purity down, price up
- Cocaine –** availability easy, use up, purity up, price stable to increasing
- Methamphetamine –** availability easy, use up, purity fluctuating, price stable to increasing, type available changing

### **TASMANIA**

- Heroin –** continuing low purity, availability and use, users tend toward related drugs, such as morphine
- Methamphetamine –** more potent forms continue to be easily available, attracting more users and users away from opiates (e.g. morphine)
- Benzodiazepines –** stabilization of previously identified trend to increasing rates of temazepam injection