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Australian use of underground illicit drug websites jumps

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The number of illicit drug retailers selling to Australia on underground websites such as the now defunct Silk Road increased significantly in 2013, according to monitoring by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at UNSW. The number of Australian retailers selling online also increased during the period.

The total numbers of retailers on the Silk Road increased by 42 per cent in the six months to the site's closure in October 2013.

Researchers found the Silk Road was quickly replaced by alternate sites in the wake of its forced shutdown.

The number of Australian retailers operating on the Silk Road more than doubled from 53 to 129 over the six months from February 2013. International retailers selling to Australia on the Silk Road increased by 27 per cent over the same period from 353 in February 2013 to 450 in September 2013.

The research also found that demand for new psychoactive substances (NPS) - so called "designer" synthetic drugs -- had actually dropped compared with demand for traditional illicit substances:

- Cannabis and prescription drugs (predominantly benzodiazepines, prescription opioids and prescription stimulants) were the most commonly sold drugs on the sites. Significantly prescription drugs jumped from fourth to the second most common drug type for sale on the sites.
- New psychoactive substances (NPS) dropped from second most commonly sold substance to fourth most commonly sold substance compared to the previous monitoring period (August 2012 to February 2013).

Lead author of the report, NDARC Senior Research Officer Mr Joe Van Buskirk, said the increase in the number of Australian retailers on the underground or "dark web" sites, which continued even after the closure of the Silk Road, indicated a rapidly changing and responsive market. Two sites which opened in the wake of closure of the Silk Road – BMR and the Sheep

Marketplace - have since closed but at least ten additional markets of varying size now exist on the dark web, he said.

“The sites have increasingly advanced security features”, said Mr Van Buskirk. “It appears that faith in the security of dark web marketplaces has not diminished since the closure of the Silk Road.

“As well, the popularity of cannabis and prescription opioids on the sites suggests that these marketplaces mirror the illicit drug purchasing behaviour happening in traditional street marketplaces rather than representing totally new marketplaces.”

Associate Professor Lucy Burns, who leads NDARC’s Drug Trends monitoring unit, said the ongoing internet research will allow policy makers and law enforcement agencies to have a more accurate picture of the Australian drug marketplace.

“Our research of existing traditional marketplaces indicates that use of the internet for purchasing drugs in Australia is low.

“This research does not tell us in what amounts and how often illicit substances are being purchased online,” she said.

However given the huge role of social media in communication generally, it is important to track changes in the marketplace and that’s why the Centre has established an ongoing internet monitoring program, Associate Professor Burns said

“Similar to other drug trend monitoring systems already established at NDARC, this program of work allows us to analyse the nature of online drug markets and will allow us to track over time such things as changes in drug prices, drug availability, and how many retailers are selling online.”

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