Shining the Light on Australia’s Top End: A Snapshot of the 2014 NT EDRS

Elizabeth Whittaker & Lucy Burns
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Study overview and aim

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) is primarily concerned with monitoring the use, market characteristics and associated harms of ecstasy and related drugs (EDR), including methamphetamine, cocaine, GHB, LSD, ketamine and new psychoactive substances (NPS) in all jurisdictions including the Northern Territory (NT).

The program is intended to serve as a strategic early warning system to prepare policy makers and both health and law enforcement sectors for issues likely to be of future concern.

The aim of this study is to investigate substance use and associated risk behaviours in a sample of regular psychostimulant users (RPU) in the NT.

NT’s recruitment strategy – did it work?

Using the national eligibility criteria, the NT EDRS has been the only jurisdiction to struggle to attract a sample of meaningful size in past years (see Figure 1).

Three changes were made to the NT EDRS recruitment criterion to reach 100 participants (see Table 1), and we are very pleased that:

2014 was the first year we recruited 100 RPU for the NT EDRS

Since this is the first year the NT has achieved a sample of 100, this poster will compare the NT sample against the national EDRS sample and highlight the key differences.

Table 1: Comparison of national and NT criterion for the 2014 EDRS.

National criterion | NT criterion | Reason for change
--- | --- | ---
Regular use in their jurisdiction's capital city | Regular use in Australia | Darwin residents are transient
Resided in the capital city for the last 12 months | No minimum time requirement in Darwin | Darwin residents are transient
Recruitment commenced in March | Recruitment commenced in June | EDR use more frequent in the dry season

Demographics and recent substance use patterns

The demographic characteristics of the NT RPU often differ notably to the national sample (see Table 2), which is partly why the NT EDRS eligibility criteria was tailored.

Significant demographic differences in 2014 were:

• More even gender split in the NT sample
• Less Australian born RPU – more backpackers
• More RPU unemployed and working P-T/casual
• Higher income reported by NT RPU

Substance use patterns by the NT RPU were mostly similar to the national sample (see Table 3), however significantly less NT RPU had recently used ecstasy capsules (32% vs. 55%) or a NPS (29% vs. 41%).

Table 2: Demographics of RPU, NT and nationally, 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variables</th>
<th>NT (N=100)</th>
<th>National (N=700)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% male</td>
<td>57*</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% A&amp;TSI</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Australian born</td>
<td>63**</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% heterosexual</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% tertiary qualifications</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% employed full-time</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% unemployed</td>
<td>30**</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% employed part-time/casual</td>
<td>35*</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% full-time student</td>
<td>0**</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean weekly income</td>
<td>$898**</td>
<td>$561</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Percentage of RPU who used each drug type in the past six months, NT and nationally, 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug (%)</th>
<th>Ecstasy/MDMA</th>
<th>Methamphetamine</th>
<th>Cocaine</th>
<th>Ketamine</th>
<th>LSD</th>
<th>Cannabis</th>
<th>NPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NT (N=100)</td>
<td>Pills</td>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>Caps</td>
<td>Powder</td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Base</td>
<td>Ice/crystal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National (N=700)</td>
<td>Pills</td>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>Caps</td>
<td>Powder</td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Base</td>
<td>Ice/crystal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Risks emerging among NT RPU

Bingeing
Half (50%) of NT RPU had recently binged on a stimulant (compared to 34% nationally).

Sexual engagement and check-ups
A higher proportion of NT RPU had recently engaged in casual sexual behaviours (71% vs. 63% nationally), and a higher proportion had also had a sexual health check-up in the last year (62% vs. 47%).

Recently arrested
More NT RPU reported being arrested in the past six months (18% vs. 11%), most commonly for public order or a violent crime.

Availability
Generally, NT RPU reported more difficulty accessing various drugs than the national sample. This was most noted for speed, ice, cocaine and LSD.

PPA: How does the NT compare?

Price
Higher prices in the NT than the rest of Australia. Most notably:
• ecstasy pill ($40 vs. $25)
• speed ($335 vs. $250/g/m)
• ice ($850 vs. $500/g/m)

Purity
Reported purity in the NT varied across drug types. Most notably, NT RPU reported higher purity of ecstasy and LSD, but lower potency of bush cannabis.

Acknowledgements
The NT Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) was supported by funding from the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund.

For more information
Please contact Elizabeth Whittaker (NDARC)
P: (02) 9385 0254
E: e.whittaker@unsw.edu.au