



## **STUDIES SIGNAL CHANGES IN HEROIN AND METHAMPHETAMINE USE**

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The frequency of heroin use has increased among regular injecting drug users (IDU) in larger capital cities in Australia, according to new research investigating emerging trends in the illicit drug market. In Sydney, for example, the median days of use increased from 72 to 96 out of the past 180.

This is one of the findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) and the Ecstasy and Related Drug Reporting System (EDRS), which will be delivered at the National Drug Trends Conference on Monday, October 15 at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. The IDRS monitors the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. The EDRS examines ecstasy and related drug markets.

The study also found that crystal methamphetamine ('crystal' or 'ice') use appears to have either stabilised or reduced among both regular IDU and regular ecstasy users (REU).

Crystal methamphetamine use among regular IDU across the country dropped from 57% to 47% between 2006 and 2007. Particularly large decreases were noted in capital cities that had documented extremely high levels of use in previous years, such as Perth (76% in 2006, to 56% in 2007), Brisbane (55% to 39%) and Canberra (88% to 80%).

In addition to the changes in patterns of crystal methamphetamine use among IDU, similar trends were documented among REU, where nationally, use dropped from 49% to 33%, with decreases reported across all capital cities.

These changes do not appear to be due to a decrease in availability or increased price of the drug. Similar proportions of both IDU and REU reported that crystal methamphetamine was "very easy" to obtain in 2007 compared to 2006.

However there were reports from both drug users and key experts that there was a growing stigma associated with the use of methamphetamine (particularly the most potent form, ice or crystal), as users increasingly saw the negative consequences of the drug's use for some people who use the drug.

Associate Professor Louisa Degenhardt, from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales, said “minorities of both IDUs and REU still report that they use crystal methamphetamine on a frequent basis, and both injecting and smoking of the drug pose significant risks.”

“Providing information on those risks is vitally important, as is providing treatment options for those experiencing problems with dependence. We know there is still a huge gap here between treatment need and treatment delivery, and that must be addressed.”

Degenhardt said that this year’s collection of data suggests that users may be returning to old patterns of heroin use, with availability increasing slightly in areas with established heroin markets over the past year. Data on purity were unavailable, although IDU reports indicated that this may also have increased.

As well as changes in the use of heroin across the country, this year’s study has shown that one in five (21%) regular IDU reported recently using “brown” heroin – typically in larger cities. Brown heroin can result from a different production method than is typically used to produce white or “number 4” heroin. Number 4 heroin is the type of heroin typically produced in the Golden Triangle region (including Myanmar). Further investigation is required into this finding.

Brown heroin also requires a different method of preparation for use. “Brown heroin is typically alkaline and carries different risks that users need to know about”, said A/Prof Degenhardt. “Similarly, if the purity has increased, then the risk of overdose may be heightened for those previously using heroin of a lower purity.”

To provide timely information on emerging illicit drug trends, interviews are carried out with people who are regular drug users, 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.

In the past our drug monitoring systems have been able to identify significant changes to the Australian illicit drug market in a timely manner (e.g. increased crystal methamphetamine use was identified as an issue in 2000) to ensure that policy makers are prepared and that frontline health workers are resourced appropriately.

“This year’s findings have implications for those working in the drug and alcohol sector,” concluded A/Prof Degenhardt. “The major benefit of our drug monitoring systems is that we can 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 long after they have begun.”

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**Contact Details: Paul Dillon, tel. 9385 0226 or 0419 402 099, email [p.dillon@unsw.edu.au](mailto:p.dillon@unsw.edu.au)** *Date Issued: October 13 2007*