

KEY POINTS

Changes in Patterns of Drug Use Associated With the Reduced Availability of Heroin

1. The prevalence and frequency of heroin use declined in all jurisdictions, and was most marked in VIC, WA and the ACT.
2. There were marked increases in the prevalence of methamphetamine use in VIC, SA, QLD, WA and the ACT.
3. There were considerable increases in both the prevalence and frequency of cocaine use in NSW. The prevalence of cocaine use also increased in VIC, SA, QLD, WA the ACT and TAS. However, use remained sporadic in jurisdictions outside NSW.
4. There were substantial increases in both the use and injection of other opioid preparations, predominantly morphine, in VIC, SA and the ACT.

INTRODUCTION

The December 2001 *Drug Trends Bulletin* presented data from the 2001 IDRS that confirmed anecdotal reports of a marked and sustained reduction across Australia in the availability of heroin, that commenced around December 2000. The price of heroin increased in all jurisdictions except the NT and TAS, where heroin has traditionally been difficult to obtain; there was a dramatic reduction in the availability of heroin in NSW, VIC, QLD, WA and the ACT; and there were declines in the purity of heroin seizures.

The current *Drug Trends Bulletin* examines changes in drug use patterns of injecting drug users (IDU) that have occurred in response to the reduced availability of heroin. The data presented in this report are based upon the national sample of 951 IDU recruited for the 2001 IDRS, and the 910 IDU recruited in 2000.

HEROIN USE

Between 2000 and 2001, there was a sharp decline in the proportion of the overall IDU samples that nominated heroin as their drug of choice from 63% to 48% (Table 1). The decrease in the proportion of IDU describing heroin as their drug of choice occurred in all jurisdictions. The proportion of IDU who reported that heroin was the drug that they had injected during their most recent injection episode also decreased, from 58% in 2000 to 35% in 2001. Again, this decrease was reported in all jurisdictions.

Consistent with the above data, the proportion of the overall IDU samples that had used heroin in the six months preceding the interview declined from 78% in 2000 to 66% in 2001. A more sensitive measure of the impact of the shortage is the frequency of heroin use among IDU in the preceding six months. There was a substantial decline between 2000 and 2001 in the frequency of heroin use among

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IDRS

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Table 1. Heroin use patterns of IDU by jurisdiction, 2000-2001

	NSW	VIC	SA	QLD	WA	ACT	TAS	NT	ALL
Drug of choice (%)*									
2000	81	78	56	62	57	78	36	44	63
2001	62	61	43	42	34	61	33	39	48
Last injection (%)*									
2000	78	92	56	62	54	81	4	9	58
2001	57	62	34	34	20	49	0	7	35
Used last 6 mths (%)*									
2000	96	97	75	85	80	92	43	56	78
2001	95	90	65	62	55	83	24	36	66
Days used (mdn)									
2000	180	176	60	100	90	160	5	28	120
2001	158	65	30	70	30	50	3.5	6	60
Daily users (%)									
2000	49	49	14	27	22	46	0	10	29
2001	41	13	10	10	2	15	0	3	13

* Heroin

those who had used the drug recently, from an average of 120 days in the preceding six months to 60 days. In particular, the proportion of IDU that reported daily use of heroin in the six months preceding the interview declined from 29% in 2000 to 13% in 2001. The decreases in frequency of heroin use were most pronounced in VIC, the ACT and WA.

METHAMPHETAMINE USE

There was a substantial increase between 2000 and 2001 in methamphetamine use among the overall IDU samples (Table 2). There were large increases in the prevalence of methamphetamine use in VIC, SA, QLD, WA and the ACT. In addition, there were marked increases in the fre-

quency of methamphetamine use in VIC, QLD, WA and the ACT. The frequency of methamphetamine use in SA was high prior to the heroin shortage. Compared to other jurisdictions, NSW exhibited little change in methamphetamine use; changes in patterns of drug use associated with the heroin shortage in NSW related strongly to cocaine use (see below). Major changes in methamphetamine use were not documented in TAS or the NT, where heroin traditionally has not been freely available. In all other jurisdictions, major increases in methamphetamine use occurred, contiguous with the shortage of heroin. Important changes in the forms of methamphetamine available in Australia will be discussed in the July Drug Trends Bulletin.

Table 2. Methamphetamine use patterns of IDU by jurisdiction, 2000-2001

	NSW	VIC	SA	QLD	WA	ACT	TAS	NT	ALL
Drug of choice (%)*									
2000	5	5	30	24	23	8	20	21	16
2001	5	16	37	42	42	19	30	26	24
Last injection (%)*									
2000	5	6	34	34	41	16	31	30	23
2001	3	30	50	66	74	42	37	31	37
Used last 6 mths (%)*									
2000	40	53	52	71	85	68	83	74	64
2001	51	76	81	85	92	82	85	70	76
Days used (median)									
2000	7	6	51	24	20	10	25	20	15
2001	7	25	52	50	75	21	24	26	30
Daily users (%)									
2000	1	6	10	1	1	2	4	1	3
2001	1	25	9	5	11	10	5	4	6

* Methamphetamine

Table 3. Cocaine use patterns of IDU by jurisdiction, 2000-2001

	NSW	VIC	SA	QLD	WA	ACT	TAS	NT	ALL
Drug of choice (%)*									
2000	10	1	4	2	3	0	1	2	3
2001	29	2	6	0	5	1	1	2	7
Last injection (%)*									
2000	11	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
2001	37	1	2	0	2	0	1	0	7
Used cocaine (%)									
2000	63	13	20	13	22	15	6	18	24
2001	84	28	27	28	32	40	8	13	35
Days used (mdn)									
2000	12	2.5	4	2	6	2	4	3	5
2001	90	3	2	3	13	4	5	2	7
Daily users (%)									
2000	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
2001	29	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	5

* Cocaine

COCAINE USE

Between 2000 and 2001, the overall IDU sample recorded increases in cocaine as drug of choice, last drug injected, prevalence and frequency of cocaine use in the preceding six months, and the proportion of daily cocaine users (Table 3). Unlike methamphetamine, where increases in use were widespread across the country, the great majority of the increase in cocaine use occurred in NSW. Cocaine use in NSW was many times greater than in any other jurisdiction. Dramatic increases occurred in NSW in cocaine as the drug of choice, and the prevalence and frequency of recent cocaine use. The prevalence of recent cocaine use also increased in VIC, SA, Qld, WA, the ACT and TAS; however, frequency of use remained sporadic in these jurisdictions. Although in 2001 29% of IDU in NSW reported daily cocaine use in the six months preceding the interview, figures from other jurisdictions ranged from 0-1%. Given that, in recent years, cocaine has only been freely available in NSW, it is not surprising that the increase was restricted mainly to this jurisdiction. However, 2001 is the first year in which the IDRS has documented early indicators of a potential increase in the availability and use of cocaine in other jurisdictions.

OTHER DRUG USE

Also associated with the reduced availability of heroin were changes in the use of other drug classes (Table 4). Benzodiazepines, opioids other than heroin, and methadone are all widely used by heroin users, and can be used as substitutes for heroin and/or to manage heroin withdrawal. Nationally, benzodiazepine use and injection remained stable, although there are marked jurisdictional differences in the prevalence of these practices. Similarly, prevalence of the recent injection of methadone among the overall IDU sample did not vary greatly between 2000 and 2001. There were, however, notable increases in the injection of methadone syrup in NSW, WA and the ACT. The increase in NSW was the first recorded since 1998, when large syringes and butterfly infusion sets were removed from needle and syringe programs. In contrast to benzodiazepine and methadone, there were substantial increases in both the use and injection of opioid preparations other than heroin, predominantly morphine. VIC, SA and the ACT all documented sizeable increases in the use and injection of other opioids, contiguous with the heroin shortage. Consistent with the results of the 2000 IDRS, the use of these preparations was most prevalent in TAS and the NT.

Table 4. Other drug use patterns of IDU by jurisdiction, 2000-2001

	NSW	VIC	SA	QLD	WA	ACT	TAS	NT	ALL
BZDs*									
Used (%)									
2000	61	74	65	80	72	67	81	29	63
2001	56	78	57	64	51	66	85	53	64
Injected (%)									
2000	13	36	5	16	21	15	37	12	21
2001	18	40	9	27	14	14	37	27	24
Other opiates									
Used (%)									
2000	23	38	23	51	51	30	83	76	37
2001	21	49	52	38	37	49	75	83	50
Injected (%)									
2000	12	24	11	33	36	17	77	73	26
2001	12	37	34	32	32	46	74	78	42
Methadone									
Injected (%)									
2000	13	3	22	32	8	19	74	19	22
2001	22	6	16	14	15	27	76	22	23

* Benzodiazepines

SUMMARY

In 2001, Australian illicit drug markets experienced a marked and sustained reduction in the availability of heroin, which was associated with major changes in the use of other drug classes among IDU. In particular, there were widespread increases in the use of methamphetamine. In contrast to other jurisdictions, the major increase in stimulant use detected in NSW was strongly associated with cocaine. Although there are early indicators that cocaine use may be increasing in other jurisdictions, in 2001 the drug remained predominantly a problem for NSW. In contrast to other jurisdictions, TAS and the NT displayed few changes between 2000 and 2001 in patterns of drug use. Heroin in these jurisdictions, however, has traditionally been difficult to obtain.

The unprecedented decrease in heroin availability in Australia demonstrates the value of accessing truly national samples of IDU, to compare trends both across jurisdictions and over time. In the two years in which the complete IDRS has been conducted in all jurisdictions, the monitoring system has clearly demonstrated there is no single Australian drug market. In 2001, the IDRS also documented the divergent responses of the markets in different jurisdictions to shortages in the supply of a major illicit drug such as heroin.