



NEW STUDY SHATTERS COCAINE'S HIGH FLYING IMAGE

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Research released today shatters the myth that cocaine is being exclusively used by wealthy professionals in Sydney and Melbourne.

The study found the average cocaine user was just as likely to be a plumber as a stockbroker. So called high flyers played only a small part in the total amount of cocaine consumed in Australia.

Chief Investigator of the project, Mr James Shearer from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) said that the study's findings, presented this week at the APSAD Conference in Melbourne, had contributed to a much better understanding of the cocaine market.

"Based on the usage patterns identified in the study, we have been able to estimate that almost three tonnes of cocaine are consumed every year in Sydney and Melbourne, with Sydney users accounting for up to 90% of total consumption," said Mr Shearer. "This finding is consistent with recent interceptions by Australian Customs and the Australian Federal Police of hundreds of kilograms of cocaine on its way or arriving in Australia."

The study funded by the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund (NDLERF) was conducted by NDARC at the University of New South Wales in Sydney in collaboration with Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre in Melbourne.

Some of the key findings of the report to be presented at the APSAD Conference being held at the Hilton on the Park in Melbourne this week include the following:

- There were no specific industry or occupational groups over-represented. The hospitality industry accounted for 16% of the sample, tradesmen such as plumbers, mechanics and carpenters accounted for 12%, the sales and retail industry also made up 12%, and professionals such as management consultants and lawyers 11%.
- The average use of cocaine reported by those who snorted the drug in Sydney was 1 gram per month (with users spending around \$250 per month on the drug).
- The average cocaine use by Sydney injectors was 6 grams per month (around \$2800 per month).

The study was one of the largest and perhaps most sophisticated ever carried out in the Australian cocaine market. It included advertisements in Australia's financial press and information gathered from people through face-to-face interviews and interviews submitted through a secure internet site to protect their identity.

A total of 298 cocaine users provided information on how much cocaine they used, where and why they used it, what other drugs they used, how much they paid for it and any health or social problems their use may have caused them.

Little hard evidence has been collected on cocaine use in Australia in the past, mainly because it was believed to be too hard to study a drug used across such divergent groups in the community from street sex workers and injecting drug users through to young urban professionals and stars in sports and entertainment. More functional users of cocaine rarely come into contact with health services or law enforcement - the more traditional sources of information on drug trends.

The price of cocaine was similar in both cities at between \$250 and \$300 per gram, which is substantially more expensive than other recreational drugs such as ecstasy and crystal methamphetamine.

The most important difference between the cities was high levels of cocaine use among injecting drug users who were almost entirely based in Sydney. They accounted for half of all cocaine used and had the most health and personal problems from their use. In contrast, the more socially integrated users who were employed or studied, reported very few problems from their occasional use of cocaine.

Mr Shearer said that this study would help inform policy makers and health workers about the Australian cocaine market, particularly in regards as to where there was the greatest harm.

“This study has shed light on a little understood phenomenon and exposed urban myths about who really uses cocaine in Australia,” he said. “High flyers may garner the most media attention but the greatest levels of cocaine use and associated problems including crime, risk from HIV/AIDS, addiction and other mental and physical health problems are among marginalised injecting drug users in Sydney.”

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