Drug Trends: Monitoring Patterns of Substance Use and Harms over Time in Australia

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The Difference is Research

Background

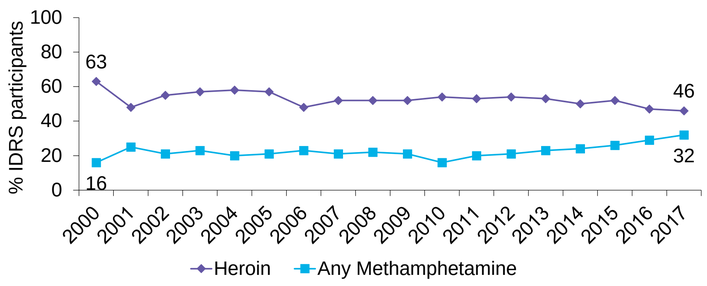
The Drug Trends program uses various data sources to measure trends in illicit drug use and harms in Australia. The purpose of the program is to detect changes in illicit drug use, markets, and harms over time; to share and communicate these trends to key stakeholders; and to point to areas requiring specialised research.

Face-to-face interviews are conducted with people who inject drugs (PWID; Illicit Drug Reporting System) and people who regularly use stimulants (Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System) recruited across Australian capital cities (~100 in each city, 800-900 across the country), and indicator data is routinely collected on drug-related mortality, hospital separations, seizures, and treatment episodes.

Intersection between opioids and methamphetamine

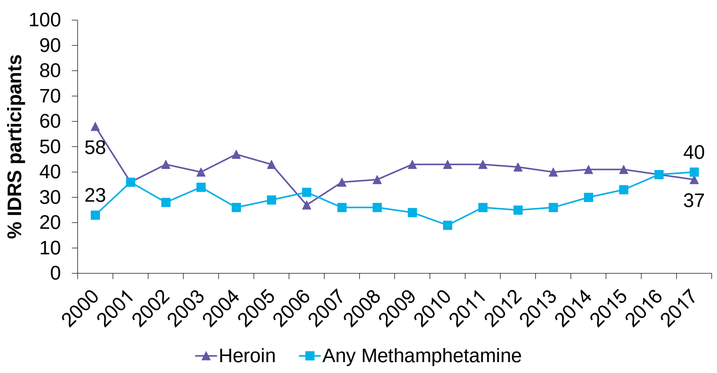
Heroin remains the drug of choice among our IDRS sample; however, in 2017 methamphetamine emerged as the drug injected most often in the last month.

Figure 1: Drug of choice, nationally, 2000-2017



Source: IDRS participant interviews

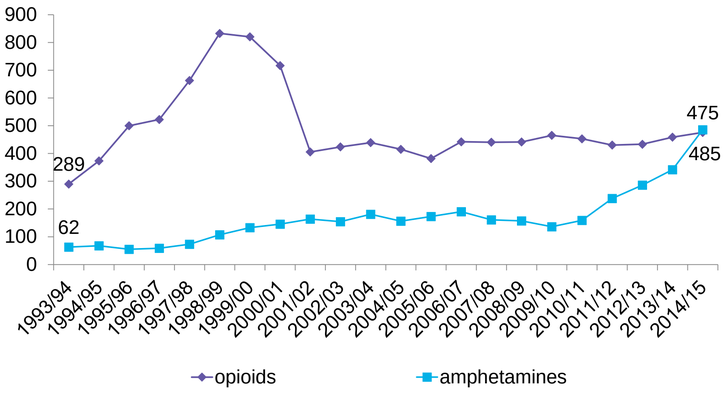
Figure 2: Drug injected most often in last month, nationally, 2000-2017



Source: IDRS participant interviews

Rates of hospital separations have historically been highest for opioids; however in 2014/15, for the first time, rates of amphetamine hospital separations surpassed those for opioids.

Figure 3: Rates per million persons of principle drug-related hospital separations in Australia among persons aged 15-54, by drug type, 1993-2015



Source: Roxburgh, A., and Breen, C. (2017). *Drug-related hospital stays in Australia, 1993-2015*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales

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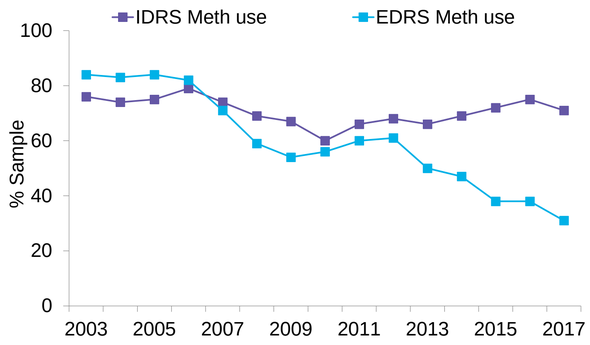
Methamphetamine

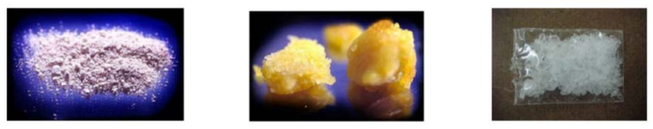
- Patterns of methamphetamine use differ across different subsamples.
- Past six month use of 'any' methamphetamine has remained relatively stable amongst the IDRS sample, however has declined sharply among the EDRS sample.

Figure 4: Percentage of population surveyed who had used any form of methamphetamine in the last six months, 2003-2017



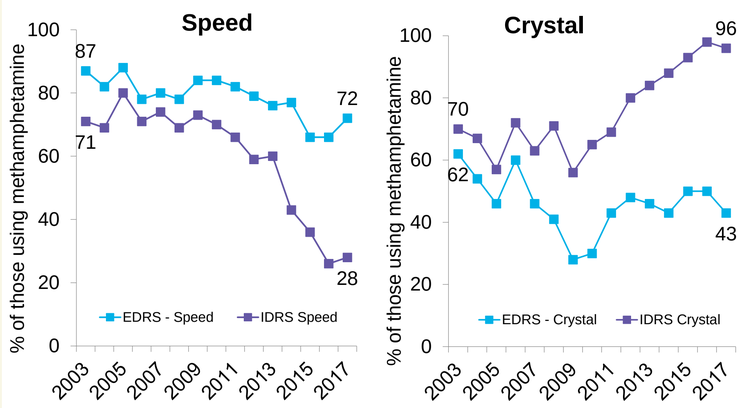
Source: IDRS and EDRS participant interviews

- Both the IDRS and EDRS distinguish between three main forms of methamphetamine: speed (methamphetamine powder), base, and crystal methamphetamine.



- Methamphetamine powder ('speed') is the most common form of methamphetamine used by our sample of people who regularly use ecstasy or other stimulants, whilst crystal methamphetamine is the most common form used among our sample of PWID.

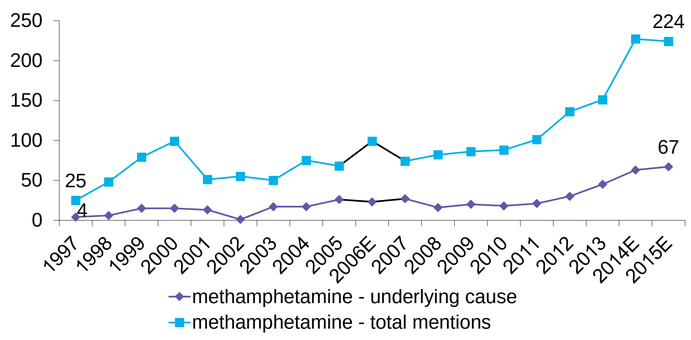
Figure 5: Percentage of population reporting use of methamphetamine who had used speed or crystal, 2003-2017



Source: IDRS and EDRS participant interviews

- In 2013, there were a total of 151 accidental "drug induced" deaths in which methamphetamine was mentioned amongst those aged 15 and 54 years (the ages when most drug related deaths occur), and 156 deaths across all ages.
- Projected estimates for 2014 and 2015 for accidental methamphetamine deaths suggest a continued upward trend from 45 to 63 in 2014, and 10 67 in 2015, which is consistent with other data.

Figure 6: Number of accidental drug-induced deaths mentioning methamphetamine among those aged 15-54 years in Australia, 1997-2013

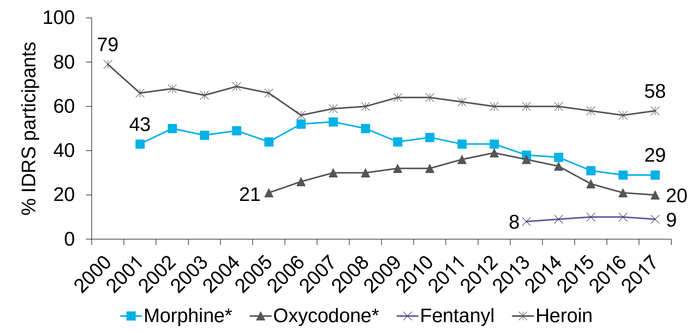


Source: Roxburgh, A., and Burns, L. (2017). *Cocaine and methamphetamine related drug-induced deaths in Australia, 2013*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
The data for 2014 and 2015 are estimates only, and are likely to change

Opioids

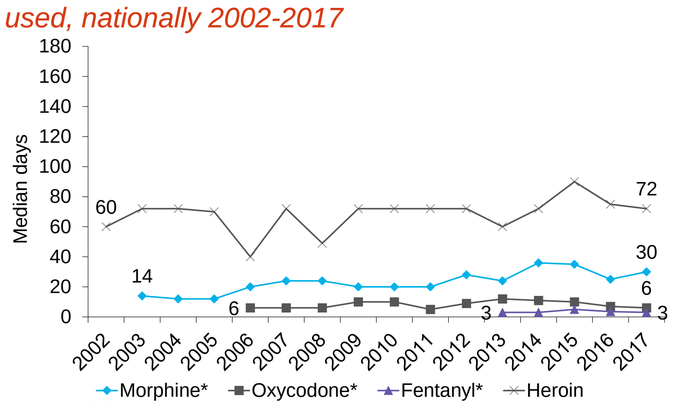
- Although overtaken as the 'drug injected most often in the last month', recent use of heroin remains high amongst PWID.
- Fentanyl use remains relatively low and stable

Figure 7: Recent use of heroin, morphine, oxycodone, and fentanyl, nationally 2000-2017



Source: IDRS participant interviews
*Data collection started in 2001 for morphine, 2005 for oxycodone and 2013 for fentanyl

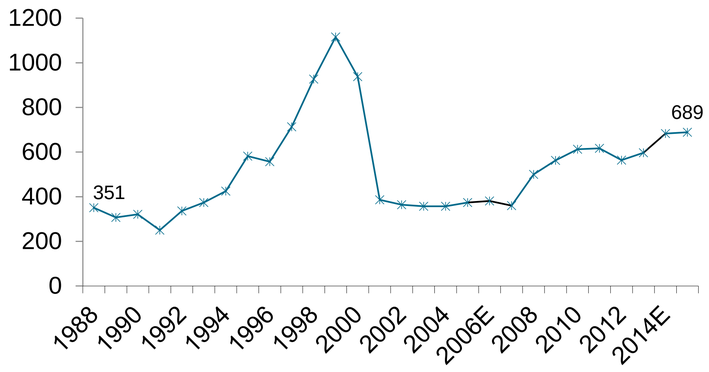
Figure 8: Median days of heroin, morphine, oxycodone, and fentanyl use amongst participants who had recently used, nationally 2002-2017



Source: IDRS participant interviews
*Data collection started in 2001 for morphine, 2005 for oxycodone and 2013 for fentanyl

- Frequency of heroin and morphine use amongst those who had recently used has fluctuated over the years.
- Frequency of fentanyl and oxycodone use remain low and stable.

Figure 9: Number of accidental deaths due to opioids amongst those aged 15-54 years, Australia 1988-2013



N.B. There is a break in the series in 2006, as these data were not revised, and are therefore likely to be an underestimate. We have estimated these data points using original data, then using an average of change across the 2007 and 2008 revisions. The 2014 and 2015 figures are estimated using changes that occurred across revisions in 2012 and 2013. These figures are not yet final. 2006E, 2014E and 2015E=Estimated.

There was a total of 597 accidental opioid overdose deaths in 2013 amongst those aged 15 to 54 years; the majority of these were due to pharmaceutical opioids (68%; n=408), followed by heroin (32%; 189).

Projected estimates for 2014 (n=684) and 2015 (n=689) suggest that accidental opioid deaths are trending upwards among those aged 15 to 54 years.

Implications

Drug Trends is responsive to changes in illicit drug use and harms in Australia. Active and wide-ranging dissemination of findings using various communication strategies targeted to audience needs will enhance possible impact on policy and practice.

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Drug Trends is supported by funding from the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund