

### **THE CAUSES, COURSE AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE HEROIN SHORTAGE IN AUSTRALIA.**

#### **NDLERF MONOGRAPH No. 3**

**Degenhardt, Day & Hall (Editors) (2004).**

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

#### **Methodology**

The researchers focussed on the impact of the heroin shortage that occurred in early 2001 on three Australian jurisdictions, namely NSW, Vic and SA. They interviewed 82 heroin dependent heroin users and 172 key informants from health and law enforcement agencies. They also examined a range of indicator data such as drug seizures, drug-related arrests, deaths related to drug use, emergency department admissions for overdose or drug induced psychosis<sup>1</sup>, calls to telephone help lines about drug use, needles distributed for drug use, and notifications about blood borne diseases. In addition a range of documentation, in particular from the law enforcement sector, was examined.

#### **Key findings:**

- For the last decade, the two major opium cultivating countries in the world have been Afghanistan, cultivating 76% of world production, and Myanmar cultivating 18%. In 2001 there was a dramatic drop in opium production in Afghanistan as a result of the actions of the Taliban ruling party.
- Australia and Canada are largely supplied with heroin from the Myanmar region. Given that Canada did not experience any alteration in heroin supply when Australia experienced its shortage, it would seem that circumstances specific to Australia led to the shortage.
- The heroin market of the late 1990s was of an unprecedented scale. However the market had a low profit margin, with high heroin purity, and low cost. Drug law enforcement received comparatively little Federal funding at the time.
- Early in 2001, heroin supply dramatically decreased in NSW, Vic and SA. The price of heroin increased, purity decreased and the amount of heroin seized at the border decreased.
- It is likely that the heroin shortage was due to a combination of factors. The increased funding provided to the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Customs Service as part of the National Drug Strategy probably made the risks of importation greater. This occurred at a time of low profitability and reduced reliability of key suppliers of heroin to Australia. All of these factors probably reduced the attractiveness of Australia as a destination for heroin trafficking.
- It is possible that heroin was sent to other countries instead of Australia but the relatively small scale of the Australian market meant that even if the entire heroin supply was diverted from this country, it would be difficult to observe the effects of this in another country.

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<sup>1</sup> Psychosis is a mental state characterized by a loss of contact with reality and an inability to think rationally. A psychotic person often behaves inappropriately and is incapable of normal social functioning.

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- Some drug users probably switched to cocaine, methamphetamine and benzodiazepines<sup>2</sup>. These changes were more apparent in NSW and Vic. The extent of injecting drug use also probably decreased. There were decreases in fatal and non-fatal heroin overdoses in all the States and there were increases in incidents of psychosis<sup>3</sup> and violence associated with psycho-stimulant<sup>4</sup> use.
- Demand for treatment for heroin-related problems reduced in the three States, and drug treatment services reported increases in client aggression and a greater demand for treatment for problems related to drugs other than heroin.
- Younger, less entrenched heroin users appeared to reduce or cease their heroin use to a greater degree than did older heroin users. These younger users may have switched to psycho-stimulant use, but may not have been injecting these drugs. Older, more entrenched users probably did not cease heroin use to the same extent, and may have started using other drugs in ways that were risky.
- Overall, the heroin shortage led to a significant reduction in the harms associated with heroin use, in particular fatal and non-fatal overdoses. It also probably led to a reduction in the number of regular heroin users, most markedly among younger age groups.
- The heroin shortage was probably caused by changes in the heroin supply to Australia related to drug law enforcement and was most likely as a result of actions aimed at the very high levels of drug trafficking.

## Implications for police

The heroin shortage that occurred in Australia in 2001 demonstrated that it is possible under some circumstances for law enforcement to accomplish a substantial reduction in the availability of illicit drugs. Importantly, this reduction was associated with overall reductions in illicit drug related harm, in particular fatal and non-fatal heroin-related overdoses. This reinforces the importance of the role of supply reduction strategies, together with demand and harm reduction strategies, in Australia's approach to drug problems.

The heroin shortage that occurred in Australia in early 2001 provided the law enforcement sector with a unique insight into the workings and impacts of the heroin markets in Australia. It also provided a good opportunity to better understand the ways in which the results of drug supply reduction activities can impact on illicit drug users, on policing and health organisations, and on the broader community.

Enhancing the knowledge base in this area allows police to better target supply reduction initiatives so as to impact upon the most harmful facets of the heroin market. This will also provide opportunities to work with other agencies to ensure that an appropriate balance of measures from different organisations are put into place to address the changing patterns of problems associated with drug use.

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<sup>2</sup> Benzodiazepines are a group of sedative drugs commonly prescribed for conditions such as insomnia and anxiety. Included in this group are drugs such as Valium(tm) (diazepam), Serapax(tm) (oxazepam), and Normison(tm) (temazepam).

<sup>3</sup> Psycho-stimulant drugs are those which elevate mood and arousal and include cocaine and methamphetamine.

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