

THE COURSE AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE HEROIN SHORTAGE IN VICTORIA.

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(Dietze, Miller, Clemens, Matthews, Gilmour and Collins, 2004).

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

Methodology

The researchers collected and analysed a range of existing data sources and conducted a series of interviews with key informants and injecting drug users.

Key findings:

- Heroin use and related harms increased dramatically in the late 1990s in Victoria and this was followed by a dramatic decrease in heroin supply in late 2000/early 2001.
- There was a decrease in the purity of samples of heroin analysed in Victoria during this period, however this decline appeared to be established before the onset of the acute period of the shortage. The availability of heroin also decreased and the price increased.
- Injecting drug users reported a decrease in heroin use and in the frequency of their injection.
- During this period there was an 85% decline in the number of heroin-related deaths in Victoria, a 52% decline in the number of non-fatal overdoses in Melbourne, and a 61% decline in the number of opioid¹ hospitalisations in Victoria. There was also a decline in the number of courses of treatment for opioids that were provided by specialist drug treatment services in Victoria.
- There was a short term increase in the number of robbery incidents recorded by Victoria Police.
- The heroin shortage meant that service agencies were able to focus on other issues/drugs that were unable to be addressed during the high levels of heroin use that were evident in the late 1990s.
- The overall extent of injecting drug use appeared to change little in Victoria as a result of the heroin shortage, suggesting that injecting drug users (IDUs) changed their drug use patterns as a result of the shortage. In particular, amphetamine, benzodiazepine², prescribed opioid, and cannabis use increased among those IDUs who were interviewed. Overall, the researchers' findings suggested that a market for prescribed pharmaceuticals emerged during this period, and that this has been sustained in the longer term.
- There appeared to be a decline in the physical and mental health of IDUs during this period. Important in this regard were: increases in the numbers of pregnant women with psycho-stimulant³-related issues; an increase in the number of injection-related problems among IDUs;

¹ Opioids are the group of drugs that includes heroin, morphine, methadone, oxycodone.

² 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).

³ Psycho-stimulant drugs are those which elevate mood and arousal and include cocaine and methamphetamine and ecstasy.

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an increase in injecting practices related to risks for blood-borne virus transmission; and a decrease in the rate of presentation for opioid-related problems at drug treatment agencies.

- There was an apparent decline in drug-related activity around Melbourne's street-based drug markets, however, this decline appeared to commence prior to the onset of the most acute period of the heroin shortage. Overall, there was a substantive decline in street-based markets, that was attributable to the heroin shortage and this was not offset by an increase in reported incidents related to drugs other than heroin.
- IDUs and key informants reported increased rates of property, sex-related and violent crime, however this was not supported by available crime data. This suggests the possibility that the reported increases in crime attributed to the heroin shortage were perpetrated against other heroin market participants, who were probably less likely to report their experience of crime than were other members of the public.
- The heroin shortage resulted in less resources being devoted to the policing of heroin; an increased focus on other crime; improved linkages between health and law enforcement agencies; and increased job satisfaction on the behalf of law enforcement officers.

Implications for police

On the one hand, in Victoria, the heroin shortage resulted in substantial reductions in deaths, illness and injury among heroin users. On the other hand, many of the short term changes relating to patterns of drug use that occurred as a result of the heroin shortage appear to have become entrenched. This includes increases in the use of pharmaceutical drugs and psycho-stimulants.

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 dynamic changes in drug markets 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 understanding will provide opportunities to work with other agencies to ensure that the appropriate balance of measures from different organisations are put into place to address the variable patterns of drug-related problems in our community.

A full copy of this report is available on the NDLERF website at www.ndlerf.gov.au

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