

THE POLICING IMPLICATIONS OF CANNABIS AMPHETAMINE & OTHER ILLICIT DRUG USE IN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES.

NDLERF MONOGRAPH No. 15 & 15A

Delahunty and Putt (2006).

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

Methodology

The research involved community consultations via meetings, forums and interviews as well as access to local data from Indigenous communities in Western Australia (Kalgoorlie, Laverton and Warburton), Queensland (Rockhampton, Woorabinda and Mount Morgan), South Australia (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands), and the Northern Territory (The Tiwi Islands).

It also involved consultations with representatives of key stakeholder groups in government and non-government organisations, a review of relevant literature and legislation, and a survey of 792 urban and (predominantly) non-urban police from the four jurisdictions involved.

Key findings:

- In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the availability and use of cannabis in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settlements. Eighty one percent of police surveyed, reported that cannabis was easily available in their local area and 87% thought that cannabis was very commonly used, or commonly used by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Further, 36% said that this use had increased or greatly increased in the past three years. Similarly, 85% of police reported that amphetamines were available or easily available in their area and 34% said they were commonly or very commonly used by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (particularly in urban areas).
- Up to two thirds of males and one in five females in some communities are regularly using cannabis, including some who smoke up to twenty 'joints' in a single session. Some of the poorest and youngest users spend between one third and two thirds of their income on cannabis, and the age of first time use is falling, with children as young as 10 or eleven years smoking the drug.
- This new wave of cannabis use is occurring in addition to, not instead of, the use of alcohol and other substances.
- Police reported that heavy cannabis use exacerbates many existing problems among local Indigenous residents, particularly family violence and mental health problems.
- The highly profitable drug distribution networks that are currently supplying cannabis could pave the way for a rapid expansion in the use of amphetamines or other injectable drugs in the future.
- There is strong anecdotal evidence that some local and non-local Aboriginal people are heavily

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implicated in the cannabis trade in regional and remote areas, but less so in dealing and distributing amphetamines.

- Effective drug law enforcement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requires: the close cooperation and support of community leaders; high quality intelligence; sensitivity to local issues; and logistical support from police organisations.
- Police play an important role in reducing drug related harm through managing drug-affected people in public and custody. This is made difficult in rural and remote areas because of the long distances involved in custody transfers, outdated or unsafe police facilities, inadequate staffing, and a lack of sobering up facilities. In this regard, promising community and police initiatives include night patrols, the involvement of community leaders in determining responses to drug affected behaviour, focussing police resources on offences that are of greatest concern to the community, a permanent police presence in more remote locations and capital works to improve amenities.
- A combination of community policing and enforcement strategies can assist in the removal of local drug dealers and in the undermining of their support base.
- Key challenges to drug law enforcement activities in rural remote areas include: identifying and rewarding the policing skills required to work in these areas; training and induction programs; recruiting, supporting and developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; enhancing the use of police information systems; and building partnerships with other government agencies, non-government organisations and communities.
- Monograph 15A synthesises the findings of the research into a single document that focuses on opportunities to improve policing in this area. It examines these opportunities at the levels of strategic programs and policies; local, district and regional area planning; and individual policing practices. This provides examples, checklists and scenarios that can be adapted to suit particular locations and organisational and jurisdictional priorities.

Implications for police

There is little doubt that there is a need for urgent action to stem the unprecedented flood of cannabis availability that has occurred in some communities in recent years. This is particularly concerning in the context that it is occurring in addition to the existing problems associated with the misuse of alcohol and other substances. It is also occurring in the context of considerable social disadvantage.

It can be hard for police to know where to begin in responding to these problems, however the tools provided by the researchers will undoubtedly assist to make sense of what are clearly complex situations. Indeed, the researchers highlighted a number of existing policing strategies that are consistent with good practice in this area.

Doing nothing is clearly not an option, particularly when it is considered that the trafficking routes and methods that are currently used for cannabis could easily be adapted to amphetamines and other injectable drugs. If the use of amphetamines were to become as prevalent as is the use of cannabis, the results would be catastrophic for the communities and would make the provision of policing services considerably more difficult.

The recruitment and retention of police staff to work in remote areas is clearly a major (but not insurmountable) challenge. The researchers highlighted a number of strategies that could assist in this regard.

Finally, it is important to be realistic about what police can be expected to achieve in these high-need areas, particularly given the complexities of the underlying problems.

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

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