

CONTAINING ECSTASY: ANALYTICAL TOOLS FOR PROFILING AN ILLEGAL DRUG MARKET.

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Fowler, Kinner & Krenske (2007).

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

Methodology

The aim of the project was to develop a research template (the Ecstasy Market Indicator [EMI]) to measure the Queensland (and ultimately Australian) ecstasy markets. The study involved expanding the size and scope of the Ecstasy and related Drugs Reporting System in Queensland for the purposes of the research. A series of in-depth interviews were also held with ecstasy consumers, ecstasy suppliers and health and law enforcement personnel. Relevant and available survey and indicator data held by health and law enforcement agencies was also collated and analysed.

Key findings:

- No one analytical tool is available that comprehensively profiles illegal drug markets, hence a combination of methods is required for different drug markets and different market participants. Drug markets cannot be understood by just focusing on supply side activities and by examining health-related harms. This data provides very little insight into ecstasy markets in particular. Even if this kind of data was able to provide a comprehensive view of ecstasy drug markets, Australian drug seizure and health-related data is still deficient in terms of accuracy, comparability and consistency. Even drug seizure data, which should be easy to compile, often is not. Sustained research engagement with regular ecstasy consumers and suppliers could make an important addition to our understanding of ecstasy markets.
- Australia has some of the highest (reported) levels of ecstasy use in the world and this level has increased in recent years. The value of the Queensland ecstasy market is between \$19.5 million and \$46 million per annum. The overall retail value of ecstasy consumption in the Australia-wide market is approximately \$182 million per year. Global ecstasy production is still concentrated in the Netherlands and Belgium, although this concentration has declined over the last decade.
- Ecstasy use is more common among younger people, and males are more likely to use ecstasy than females. Ecstasy consumers tend to be young, white, well educated and middle class. Regular ecstasy consumers are likely to consume ecstasy on a weekly basis and a median of two tablets is consumed in a typical session of use. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the use of ecstasy has become normalised, and an important factor in this, is that ecstasy is generally swallowed as a tablet rather than injected. Most ecstasy consumers do not experience problems related to their drug use that are of sufficient severity to seek treatment. Ecstasy users also do not figure prominently among drug-related deaths and between 2001 and 2004, 51 deaths in Australia were attributed primarily to drugs sold as ecstasy.

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- The number and weight of ecstasy seizures have progressively increased in Australia during the past decade. Given that demand has also increased while prices have remained stable, this clearly indicates a growing market.
- The existing knowledge concerning the structure and dynamics of mid-level supply chain activities and participants is limited. The mechanisms of the supply side of illegal drug markets can be deduced to some extent by listening to consumers, suppliers and market regulators from law enforcement and health agencies. A more sophisticated analysis of the attributes and the supply chain contexts of seizure events would greatly enhance both operational and strategic intelligence. In particular, there is significant potential for strategic intelligence to be derived from case series analysis of seizure events (drugs, precursor chemicals and clandestine laboratories) and from ethnographic research.
- Queensland ecstasy markets may be driven by local demand but they are predominantly supplied from interstate, principally Sydney, and from overseas. There is also increasing evidence of local ecstasy manufacture on a scale beyond simple experimentation.
- Ecstasy is generally imported directly into Australia from Europe, sometimes with a South East Asian transit, by air passenger and cargo, sea cargo and small vessel, and the postal system. Sea cargo being the dominant mode by volume and postal delivery the most frequent.
- The retail ecstasy market is relatively closed, in that consumers generally source ecstasy in private homes from peers in social networks. Consumers who supply peers have very similar characteristics to consumers who do not supply. This supply is usually driven not by cash profit but by other, often social, motives. Some transactions do, however, occur between unknown market participants in nightclubs and at other music events. Even these transactions, however, may involve prior planning. Unplanned purchases from unknown dealers are the exception, rather than the rule.
- Not knowing the size of illegal drug markets is a significant barrier to effective drug policy. Supply side estimates are possible (with significant limitations) for organic based drugs such as heroin and cocaine. Such estimates are not possible for amphetamine type stimulant (ATS) drugs, including ecstasy. The EMI market sizing model (which is detailed in the report) could be used to monitor ecstasy and cannabis market changes at national and jurisdictional levels.
- Illegal drug law enforcement activities are increasingly based on intelligence from diverse internal and external sources. There is considerable scope to make better use of existing data for strategic intelligence purposes and to develop a law enforcement research agenda that improves the quality of data collection and reporting.

Implications for police

Developing and maintaining profiles of illegal drug markets is resource intensive. Arguably at present, law enforcement data systems are more closely aligned to operational, rather than strategic outcomes and are still orientated towards heroin and cannabis markets rather than towards markets for amphetamine type stimulants. Extracting strategic information is therefore difficult and time consuming. There is arguably a substantial capacity to improve data collection by using multiple analytical and research tools. In this regard, it is important to engage with illegal drug suppliers and consumers in a research context. Overall, what is lacking from law enforcement analyses of illegal drug markets is the inclusion of demand-side intelligence. Better understanding of consumption patterns, consumer behaviour, knowledge and attitudes would facilitate a more accurate understanding of the market and would allow the monitoring of the responses of illicit drug users, and their suppliers, to changes in drug policy.

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

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