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Abstract | The data in this report were collected as part of the Australian Institute of Criminology's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program, which is a quarterly collection of criminal justice and drug use information from police detainees at multiple sites across Australia. From January 2015 to December 2016, 4,400 adult police detainees were interviewed in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Sydney (Bankstown and Surry Hills), most of them male (83%; n=3,647). Recent users reported consuming cannabis on average 15 out of the last 30 days before detention and rated the availability of cannabis at an average eight out of 10, while quality was given an average rating of seven out of 10. The price of cannabis was reported to be approximately \$25 per bag. Recent users reported that the price of cannabis had remained the same compared to the three months prior to interview.

The cannabis market: police detainee perspectives

Eileen Patterson & Tom Sullivan

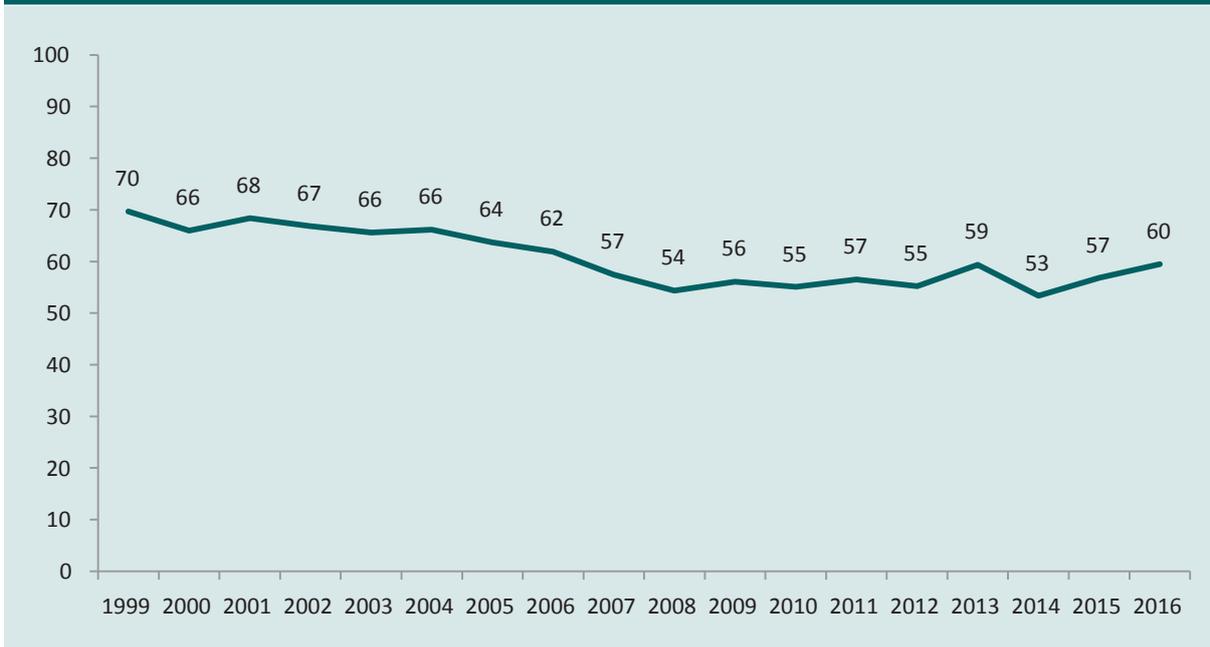
Trends in reported cannabis use

In 2015–16, 58 percent of detainees (n=2,559) reported that they had used cannabis in the previous 12 months. The percentage of detainees reporting consumption of cannabis in the 12 months before detention has remained stable since 2008 (see Figure 1). Of these 2,559 detainees, 36 percent (n=929) stated that they were dependent and 81 percent (n=2,070) reported using cannabis in the previous 30 days (hereafter referred to as 'recent users').

Recent use of cannabis

Recent users reported using cannabis on average four times per day. The mean frequency of cannabis use was 15 days out of the last 30 days before detention. The amount of cannabis consumed on each occasion of use was calculated by converting the measures specified by detainees (eg joints, bongs, cones) to the 'standard cannabis unit' (SCU; 0.25 grams) defined in the National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre guidelines (NCPIC 2009, adapted from Sobell & Sobell 1996).

Figure 1: Adult detainees who reported consuming cannabis in the 12 months before detention, 1999–2016 (%)



Note: Rates are calculated as a percentage of all detainees interviewed that year

Source: AIC DUMA collection 1999–2016 [computer file]

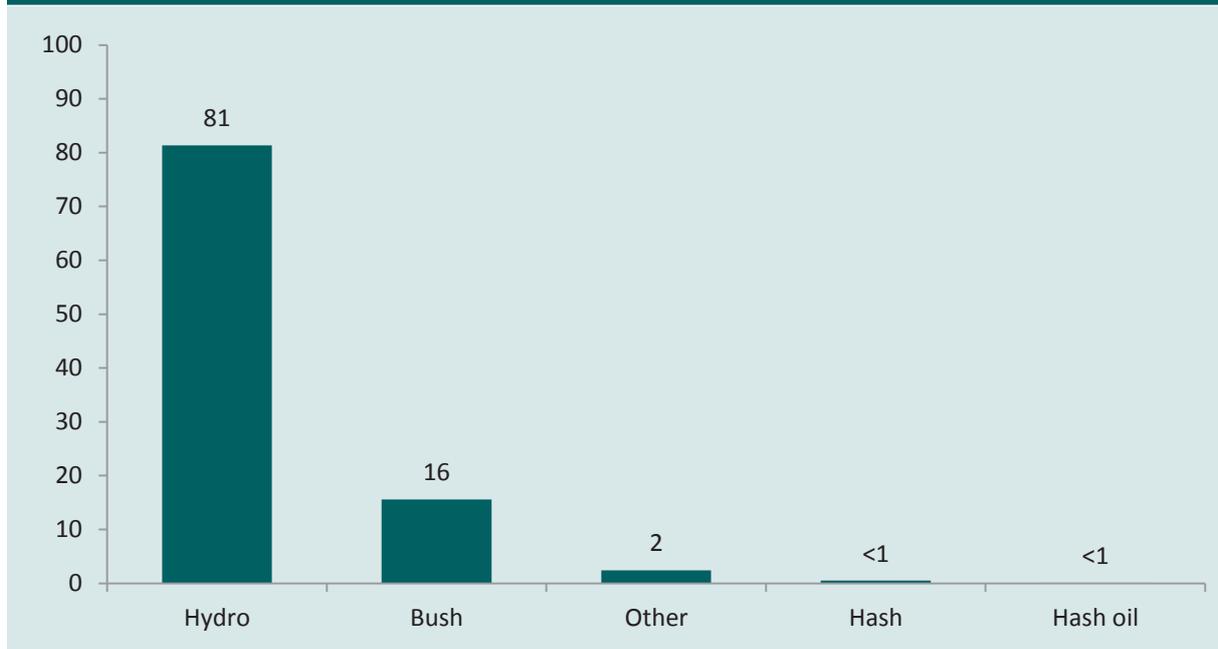
For example, one joint is equivalent to approximately 0.25 grams. Recent users who specified consumption rates (n=1,930) reported using, on average, 0.6 grams of cannabis on each occasion, equating to a mean daily consumption rate of 2.4 grams. More than one-third (38%; n=731) reported using 0.25 grams of cannabis or less on their last occasion. Sixty-two percent (n=1,199) reported consuming more than 0.25 grams of cannabis on a typical occasion of use. Recent users who reported consuming more than five grams per occasion of use were excluded from consumption rate calculations (n=38).

More than half of recent users (55%; n=1,146) reported having consumed cannabis in the 48 hours prior to detention. Seventeen percent of recent users (n=346) indicated that cannabis use, at least to some degree, contributed to the reason they had been detained. Of these, 36 percent (n=124) reported that they were high at the time of detention. When asked how intoxicated they were on cannabis at the time of arrest, those who reported being high (n=422) rated their level of intoxication, on average, to be five out of 10 (where one meant completely sober and 10 meant so intoxicated that a person would pass out or be unconscious).

Types of cannabis used

Among recent users who described the type of cannabis they used (n=1,852), 81 percent (n=1,507) indicated that the type of cannabis consumed on their last occasion of use was hydro (cannabis grown hydroponically). This was followed by 16 percent (n=289) who reported having used bush (cannabis grown outdoors). Less than one percent reported using hash (n=9) and hash oil (n<5), and two percent (n=45) reported using some other type of cannabis, which mostly consisted of hydro/ bush hybrids or synthetic cannabinoids (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Types of cannabis consumed by adult detainees on their last occasion of use, 2015–16 (%)



Note: Excludes 218 respondents where data was missing. Only adult detainees who consumed cannabis in the previous 30 days included in analysis. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2015–16 [computer file]

The Australian cannabis market

The cannabis market is predominantly a closed market—that is, sellers and buyers tend to transact with people they know and trust, or within informal friendship networks (May & Hough 2004; Lenton et al. 2015). The majority of recent users (56%; n=1,156) reported that they had sold, given away or shared their cannabis in the 30 days before detention (19% half of it, 20% some of it and 17% all of it). Forty-four percent of recent users (n=909) had not given any cannabis away.

Availability

In 2015–16, recent users rated the availability of cannabis, on average, at eight out of 10 (where one meant it was extremely hard or impossible to get and 10 meant it was readily available or overabundant). More than half of recent users (58%; n=1,191) stated that cannabis availability had stayed the same in the three months prior to their detention. Cannabis availability in Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide and Bankstown was rated at eight out of 10, while recent users in Surry Hills rated the availability of cannabis as seven out of 10.

Quality

Recent users rated the quality of cannabis at an average of seven out of 10 (where one was extremely poor quality or purity and 10 was excellent quality or high purity). The average score was between six and seven out of 10 at all sites. More than half of recent users (55%; n=1,142) reported that the quality of cannabis was the same compared with three months prior.

Price

Two in three recent users (66%; n=1,367) reported that the price of cannabis had stayed the same recently, which was consistent across all sites. Another 14 percent (n=297) reported an increase in price. The price of cannabis was reported to be approximately \$25 per bag (Quarters 3 & 4, 2015). One-third of recent users (34%; n=710) said the number of people selling cannabis had stayed the same in the previous three months. Another 22 percent (n=447) reported an increase in the number of sellers, and 18 percent (n=380) reported a decrease. This pattern was consistent across all sites; however, proportionally more detainees in Bankstown reported an increase in the number of sellers (32% versus 22% nationally).

Summary

Despite a general decline in cannabis use, the continuing popularity of cannabis among the police detainee population indicates a need to understand the nature and extent of use. On average in 2015–16, recent users reported using cannabis 15 days out of the last 30 days before detention and, on these days, their average consumption was 2.4 grams of cannabis. Dependence was reported by 36 percent of those who had used cannabis in the 12 months prior to detention. Cannabis users who were intoxicated at the time of arrest considered themselves to be, on average, moderately impaired. This may be an underestimate of the true level of impairment experienced by users, as regular or heavy users may develop tolerance or be able to function at high levels of intoxication (D'Souza et al. 2008; Ramaekers et al. 2009).

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