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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 of heroin reported using on average 12 days out of the last 30 days before detention and rated the availability at eight out of 10, while quality was given an average rating of six out of 10. Detainees reported that heroin was approximately \$50 per point, with recent users reporting that the price had remained the same compared with the three months prior to interview.

The heroin market: police detainee perspectives

Eileen Patterson & Tom Sullivan

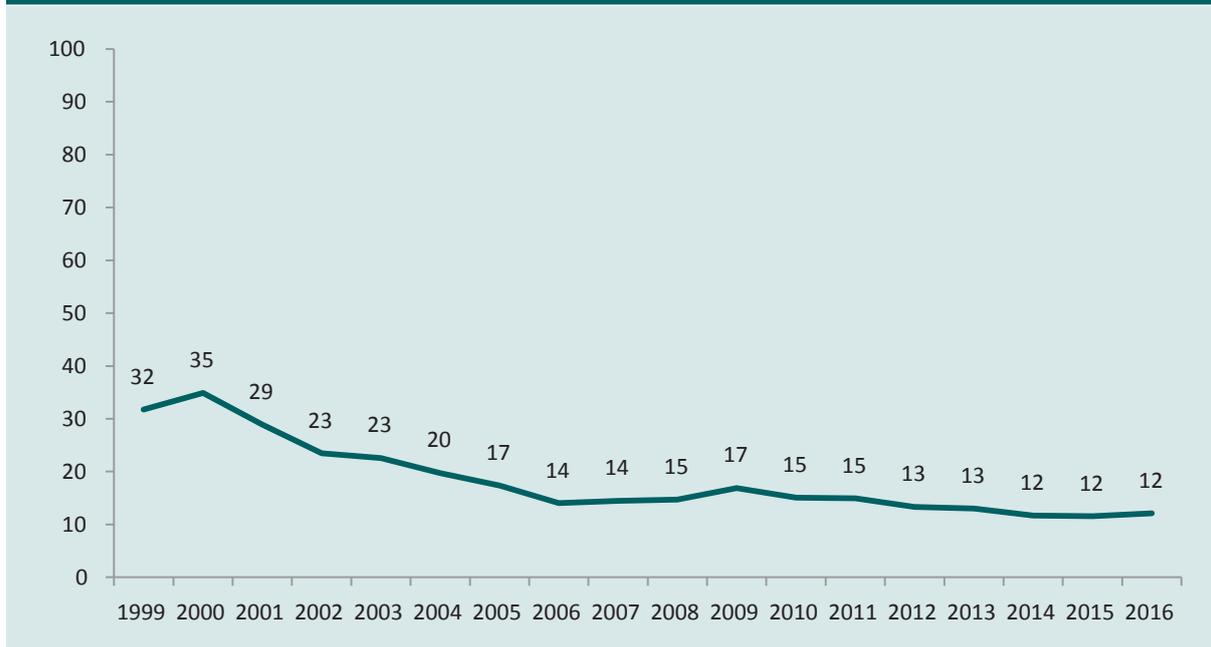
Trends in reported heroin use

In 2015–16, 12 percent (n=521) of detainees reported that they had used heroin in the previous 12 months. The rate of detainees reporting consumption of heroin in the 12 months before detention has decreased since 2009 (17% versus 12% in 2016; see Figure 1). Of the 521 detainees who reported using heroin in the previous 12 months, 50 percent (n=258) reported being dependent on the drug and 86 percent (n= 448) said they had injected it. One in four (24%; n=122) reported that they had overdosed on heroin in the previous 12 months. Sixty-four percent (n=335) of detainees who had used heroin in the previous 12 months also reported using it in the last 30 days (hereafter referred to as 'recent users').

Recent use of heroin

Recent users reported using heroin on average twice per day, at a mean frequency of 12 days out of the 30 days before detention. The amount of heroin consumed on each occasion was calculated by converting the measure specified by detainees (eg caps, units, points) into grams.

Figure 1: Adult detainees who reported consuming heroin 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]

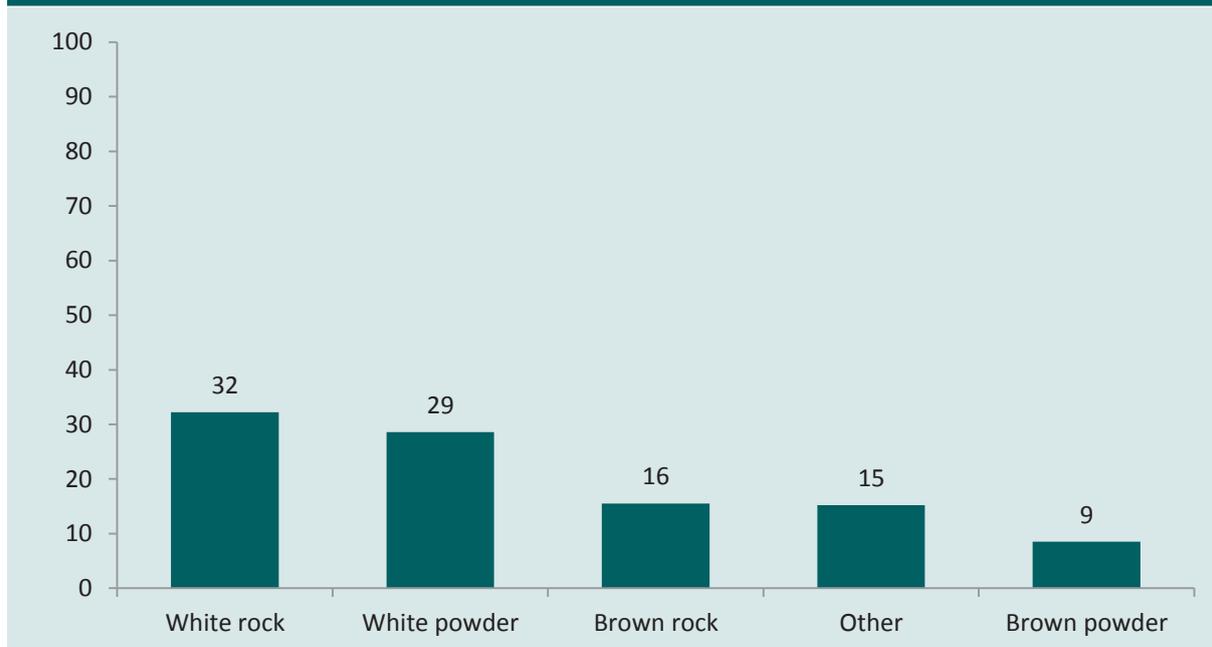
For example, one cap or point is equivalent to 0.1 grams—see Hughes et al. (2014) and Vermont Intelligence Center (2015) for heroin weight estimates. Uchtenhagen et al. (1999) reported that if heroin were offered to regular users in unlimited quantities they would typically consume an average of 0.3 to 0.5 grams per day. In the DUMA study, recent users who specified consumption rates (n=304) consumed on average 0.3 grams of heroin per occasion. This equates to an average consumption of 0.6 grams per user per day. Ninety-five percent (n=288) reported using 0.5 grams or less of heroin on a typical occasion of use, while five percent (n=16) reported using in excess of 0.5 grams. Recent users who reported consuming more than 10 grams of heroin per occasion of use were excluded from consumption rate calculations (n=5).

Forty-five percent (n=151) of recent users reported consuming heroin in the 48 hours prior to detention. Forty-four percent (n=149) of recent users also reported that heroin use contributed, at least to some degree, to their detention. Of those who reported that heroin use contributed to their detention, 40 percent (n=59) said that they were high at the time of their arrest. When asked how intoxicated or high on heroin they were at the time of arrest, those who reported intoxication (n=93) rated their level of intoxication, on average, to be six out of 10 (where one meant completely sober and 10 meant so intoxicated that a person would pass out or be unconscious).

Types of heroin used

Among recent users who described the type of heroin they used (n=329), the most common type of heroin detainees consumed on their last occasion was white rock (32%; n=106) followed by white powder (29%; n=94), brown rock (16%; n=51), other forms of heroin (15%; n=50) and brown powder (9%; n=28; see Figure 2). Other types of heroin included powder and rock forms of varying colours (beige, pink and orange) or consistencies (waxy or liquid).

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



Note: Excludes 6 respondents where data was missing. Only adult detainees who consumed heroin 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 heroin market

Since the 2001 heroin shortage, there has been evidence of changes in heroin markets. For example, a study of heroin distribution in New South Wales found that supply had shifted from open-air markets concentrated in a few locations in Sydney to a larger number of smaller markets that used covert methods of dealing and more mobile, pre-arranged purchases in backstreets or houses (Degenhardt et al. 2005). Forty percent (n=135) of recent users reported that they had sold, given away or shared at least some of their heroin in the 30 days prior to detention (17% some of it, 15% half of it, 8% most or all of it). The majority (59%; n=198) had not sold or given away any heroin.

Availability

Recent users rated the availability of heroin, 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). One in two recent users reported that the availability of heroin had not changed compared with three months prior (53%; n=177). On average, each site rated the level of availability at seven or eight out of 10. Detainee comments suggested that heroin was becoming abundant in the illicit drug market.

Quality

At each site and nationally, recent users rated the quality of heroin on average at seven out of 10 (where one meant extremely poor quality or purity and 10 meant excellent quality or high purity). Asked how the quality had changed in the past three months, the most common response was that the quality of heroin had stayed the same (43%; n=143).

Price

Most recent users (65%; n=217) reported that the price of heroin had stayed the same recently, a result found across all sites. The next most common response was that heroin was more expensive than it had been three months earlier (14%; n=46). According to detainees, the price of heroin was approximately \$50 per point (0.1 grams). One detainee reported that heroin consumption had increased due to a decrease in the quality of methamphetamine. Recent users most commonly reported that the number of dealers had remained the same compared with the previous three months (40%; n=134), and another 25 percent (n=83) reported that the number of dealers had increased. This pattern was consistent in Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. In Bankstown recent users were equally likely to report that the number of dealers had stayed the same or increased, but recent user numbers were very small (33%; n<5 for both). In Surry Hills 34 percent of recent users reported that the number of heroin dealers had increased (n=21).

Summary

Although heroin use among police detainees continues to decrease, detainee comments and ratings of availability in 2015–16 indicate that heroin is becoming more readily available in the illicit drug market, demonstrating the importance of continuing to monitor trends in its use. On average in 2015–16, recent users reported using heroin 12 days out of the last 30 days before detention and, on these days, their average consumption was 0.6 grams of heroin. A majority of recent users reported the reason for their current detention was related to their being high on heroin at the time. Moreover, users who reported being intoxicated on heroin at the time of arrest said they were, on average, moderately impaired.

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