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MEDIA RELEASE

The Australian heroin drought and its implications for drug policy

The heroin drought combined with more active street-level drug law enforcement, has produced a dramatic fall in heroin use in Cabramatta and a significant fall in heroin use throughout the rest of the State, according to the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR).

BOCSAR's conclusion is based on research involving interviews with 168 heroin users in Cabramatta and a detailed analysis of trends in the number of needles dispensed, heroin overdoses, entry into methadone treatment and police-recorded crime in the six months before and after the onset of the heroin drought (around December, 2000).

The survey revealed a sharp jump in heroin prices and a drop in heroin purity and availability. Since Christmas 2000, the average cost of half a gram of heroin in Cabramatta has risen by 35 per cent, from \$138.00 to \$186.00. The average cost of a gram of heroin has risen by 75 per cent, from \$218.00 to \$381.00.

The average cost of smaller quantities of heroin (caps and quarters) has not risen significantly but the minimum prices paid for these quantities have increased. Regular users of heroin also now report a significant drop in the purity and availability of heroin.

These changes have greatly suppressed the heroin market. In Cabramatta, the number of new needles and syringes dispensed to heroin addicts by public hospitals (a key indicator of heroin use) fell by 59 per cent between July 2000 and June 2001. The rate of heroin overdose in that area (another key indicator of heroin use) fell by 74 per cent over the same period.

The reduction in heroin use is not limited to Cabramatta. Across the State as a whole, between July 2000 and June 2001, the number of needles and syringes dispensed by public hospitals fell 16 per cent.

Many heroin users have left the heroin market and entered treatment. BOCSAR found that the number of new entrants to methadone treatment in Cabramatta almost doubled in the first few months of this year, compared with the quarter immediately preceding the onset of the drought.

Even those still using heroin appear to have reduced the amount of heroin they consume and the amount of money they spend on heroin. Heroin use and expenditure on heroin fell by 36 per cent in the six months following the onset of the heroin drought.

The popular wisdom that higher heroin prices would lead to higher crime rates does not seem to have been realised. Motor vehicle theft and theft from the person remained stable over the period July 1999 to June 2001, both in Cabramatta and across the State as a whole.

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Robberies and break and enters increased sharply in Cabramatta in the first few months after the onset of the heroin drought but just as quickly fell back to their original levels.

Shopstealing in Cabramatta declined sharply immediately after the onset of the drought and remains at a level lower than it was before the onset of the drought.

The only downside associated with the heroin drought so far is that slightly more than half (56%) of the heroin users interviewed by BOCSAR said that the shortage of heroin had prompted them to use other drugs 'to make up'.

The most common other drug being used was cocaine, although some heroin users were also using more of other drugs, such as cannabis, benzodiazapines and amphetamines.

Commenting on the findings of the study, the Director of BOCSAR, Dr Don Weatherburn said that they provide the first direct research evidence in Australia that drug law enforcement has the capacity to limit heroin use and the public health risks associated with it.

"Over the last couple of years, the quantities of heroin being seized at the Customs barrier have risen sharply and a number of important domestic heroin traffickers have been arrested. Between August and December 2000 arrests for heroin use and or possession in Cabramatta doubled."

"There are good reasons for believing that the heroin drought was at least partly caused by increased heroin seizures and the arrest of major heroin suppliers. In Cabramatta these factors have combined with more active street-level drug law enforcement to produce a dramatic fall in heroin use, heroin overdoses and expenditure on heroin."

"The major concern now is the shift which is occurring among some heroin users toward greater use of cocaine. Cocaine use poses a much bigger threat to public safety and public health than heroin use. It is vital therefore that we do everything possible to discourage cocaine injection and apprehend those who import or sell it."

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