EDRS

ECSTASY AND RELATED DRUGS REPORTING SYSTEM
DRUG TRENDS BULLETIN
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Young people, drug use and risk behaviours

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KEY FINDINGS

Drug use in younger people

Younger people are more likely to have:

- recently used LSD and cannabis
- used cannabis more frequently
- used a new psychoactive substance (DMT and NBOMe, Salvia divinorum and DXM)
- reported purchasing drugs online

Crime in younger people

Younger people are more likely to report:

- engaging in recent crime (any)
- engaging in recent property crime
- engaging in recent dealing drugs for cash profit
- engaging in recent fraud

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between age, crime and drug use has long been a subject of much investigation. Offender rates have been consistently highest among persons aged 15-19 years and lowest among those aged 25 years and older. (Australian crime statistics, 2013). It has been argued that a range of factors, including juveniles' lack of maturity, propensity to take risks and susceptibility to peer influence, as well as intellectual disability, mental illness and victimisation, increase juveniles' risks of contact with the criminal justice system. (Richards, K, 2011). While much research has investigated rates of drug use among young offenders not so much has been done on rates of criminal offences among young drug users in the community.

METHODS

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) is an Australian national monitoring study aimed at detecting emerging trends in the markets for ecstasy and related drugs. Methodology is described in full elsewhere (Topp, Breen et al. 2004). Participants were recruited through advertisements in entertainment publications in print and online, interviewer contacts, and through 'snowball' procedures (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). All respondents were volunteers who were reimbursed AUD$40 for their participation.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with current regular psychostimulant users, a non-probability sample of consumers who were selected on the basis of their at least monthly use of ecstasy and related drugs including methamphetamine, cocaine, ketamine, new psychoactive substances (such as 2C-I, DMT and mephedrone) in the six months prior to interview. The interview schedule covers such topics as demographic characteristics; lifetime and past six-month licit and illicit substance use; Kessler Psychological Distress Scale with 10 items (K10; Andrews & Slade, 2001; Kessler et al, 2002), Severity of Dependence Scale, engagement in injecting drug use and problems and help-seeking behaviour in relation to drug use. In 2014,

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800 participants were interviewed across Australia (NSW n= 100, ACT= 100, VIC= 100, TAS= 100, SA=100, WA=100, NT =100 and QLD=100), reflecting predetermined quotas. The characteristics have been reported briefly elsewhere (Sindicich & Burns, 2014) in print.

Briefly, 66% were male with a mean age of 23 years (SD 6.0); 97% were of English speaking background, 46% were tertiary qualified, 25% were currently employed full-time and 14% were full-time students. Very few (2%) identified being in drug treatment or having a prison history (4%). Fourteen percent (n=110) were between the ages of 16-18 years. For the purposes of this bulletin, groups are split into the younger group (16-18 years; n=110) and the older group (19+ years; n=690).

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS for Windows version 20.0. Categorical variables were analysed using crosstabs running a chi-square test. Comparisons were made between the younger age group (16-18 years) and the older group (19+ years), controlling for gender.

RESULTS

Demographics

A total of 800 regular psycho-stimulant users were interviewed for the 2014 EDRS study.

An analysis of demographic data revealed no differences between groups for gender, ethnicity, Indigenous status, relationship status and sexuality. Younger people were more likely than older people to report living with their parents (77% vs. 35%, p<0.001), and for their main source of income to be a parental allowance (15% vs. 3%, p<0.001). As expected, the older groups were more likely to report being employed full-time (27% vs 10%, p<0.01).

Recent traditional drug use

Younger people were more likely to report the recent use (past 6 months) of LSD (53% vs. 39%, p<0.01) and cannabis (92% vs. 81%, p<0.01). The older group were three times more likely to report the recent use of crystal meth (21% vs. 7%, p<0.001, OR 3.163). They were also more likely to use amyl nitrate (18% vs. 9%, p< 0.05) and ketamine (19% vs. 8%, p<0.01). Younger people used cannabis significantly more frequently than the older participants. Cannabis was used on a median of three times per week in the younger group vs once a week for the older group. No other differences were detected in traditional drug use (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Demographics

	Young people 16-18yr	Older 19yrs +
	(n=110)	(n=690)
% Male	72	65
% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	1	2
% heterosexual	96	88
% single	62	57
% living in family home	77***	35
% main source of income, parental allowance	15***	3
% employed full time	10	27**

#Chi square statistic calculated using t-test
* significant at p < 0.05 ** significant at p < 0.01
*** significant at p < 0.001

New psychoactive substances (NPS)

The younger group were, however, found to have been more likely to have used a drug belonging to a class of drugs termed 'new psychoactive substances' (NPS) that mimic, or have similar effects to traditional illicit drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine and cannabis. Many NPS are now listed as controlled drugs (i.e. illegal) in Australia. The younger group reported having used more NPS as a whole (51% vs. 38%; p<0.01) than the older group. Particularly the NPS drugs DMT (22% vs. 13%; p<0.01) and NBOMe (23% vs. 7%, P<0.001). NBOMe was used a median of 3 days (bi-monthly) by the younger group and only once in the past six months for the older participants (see Table 2)

Table 2 - Recently (past 6 months) drug use, by drug type

	Young people 16-18yr	Older 19yrs +
	(n=110)	(n=690)
% Recently used (past 6 months)		
Ecstasy	98	98
LSD	53**	39
Ketamine	7	19**
Amyl Nitrate	9	18*
Cannabis	92**	81
Crystal Methamphetamine	7	22***
Any NPS	51**	38
DMT	22**	13
NBOMe	23***	7
Salvia divinorum	6***	1
DXM	6**	2

#Chi square statistic calculated using t-test
* significant at p < 0.05 ** significant at p < 0.01
*** significant at p < 0.001

Mental health

There was no statistical difference in the proportion of young people who self-reported a mental health problem versus older people. However, of those people who DID report a mental health problem; young people were more likely to report depression (84% vs 63%, $p<0.05$) and 4.5 times *less* likely to report recent use of antidepressants (illicit and licit use), 2% vs 9%, $p<0.01$).

Online purchasing

A significantly higher proportion of younger people reported purchasing a (any) drug online (21% vs 13%, $p<0.05$).

When asked about online purchasing the two groups reported similar patterns. Significant differences were observed in purchasing from an international web store (surface web) with *no* younger online buyers reporting this type of purchase compared to 24% of older respondents. Younger online buyers were significantly more likely to purchase from the "Silk Road' (dark web) with 92% reporting this type of purchase compared to 65% of older online buyers. ($p<0.01$)

When asked about the type of drugs that online buyers had purchased online both age groups reported similar types of drugs with cannabis being the exception. Young people were 1.6 times more likely to report purchasing cannabis online. (47% vs. 15%, $p<0.005$).

Recent crime

All participants were asked about a range of offences and self-report data was collected on recent (past month) property crime, dealing for cash profit, fraud, and crimes involving violence. In all measures except one, young people were significantly more likely to have engaged in recent crime than older participants. A larger proportion of young people reported receiving income from crime. (5% vs 1%, $p<0.001$; see Table 3).

Table 3- Recent (past month) crime by age group

	Young people 16-18yr	Older 19yrs +
	(n=110)	(n=690)
% crime in the past month		
Property crime	25**	13
Dealing for cash profit	42***	24
Fraud	7**	2
Crime involving violence	7	4
ANY crime	56***	34

#Chi square statistic calculated using t-test
* significant at $p < 0.05$ ** significant at $p < 0.01$
*** significant at $p < 0.001$

DISCUSSION

Young people were more likely to use psychoactive substances, drugs which are quite experimental and often hallucinogenic in nature. Younger participants also reported higher rates of criminal offences including property, dealing and fraud - perhaps in order to secure funds for the purchase of substances. The younger group were also more likely to report purchasing drugs online and from dark web market places (e.g. Silk Road, Agora). This finding may also be associated with age, given the younger group may not be able to source drugs from public locations which have age restrictions such as nightclubs and pubs. Given this it may be that this group are more likely to take these substances on their own, rather than in a group setting. This has implications for the management of health issues such as overdose which may remain undetected for a longer period of time.

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Suggestion Citation

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