



Indications and implications of a gradual recovery in Perth's Heroin Market

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KEY FINDINGS

- Evidence is accumulating that the heroin market in Perth, Western Australia may be in a process of slow recovery.
- Numbers of PWID reporting recent use of heroin is the highest recorded in WA since the IDRS commenced.
- Numbers of PWID using heroin on a daily basis has generally trended upwards since 2002.
- Heroin was reported as 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain by 92% of PWID responding.
- Heroin has consistently been the drug most injected by respondents since 2009.
- However price remains high and purity modest, currently preventing a return to levels of heroin use seen in the late 90s.
- Nevertheless, ambulance callouts to narcotic overdoses are the highest seen in recent years, although increased use of morphine, oxycodone and benzodiazepines among the sample may have contributed to this.
- If heroin purity fluctuations continue, overall heroin purity and availability further increase, or the availability and use of prescription opioids by PWIDs continue to increase, opioid overdoses are also likely to grow in number.

INTRODUCTION

It is a matter of public record that in 2001, there was an abrupt and largely unexplained disruption to the supply of heroin in Australia.

Colloquially referred to as the "*heroin shortage*" (Degenhardt et al, 2006), the effects of the diminished availability of the drug were particularly severe in Western Australia and resulted in an immediate decline in numbers of recent users and their rates of use. Prices rose steeply to a median of \$750 per gram despite substantial decreases in user-reported levels of purity.

In this bulletin we examine the data collected by the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) over the years to consider the possibility that the heroin market in Perth, Western Australia may be in a process of slow recovery.

METHODS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

It needs to be noted that the IDRS is not a representative sample of people who inject drugs (PWID), but rather comprises annual samples of sentinel groups of injectors with similar characteristics, which allow trends in drug market to be tracked over time.

In 2012, 100 West Australians who inject illicit drugs on an at least monthly basis were interviewed as part of the WA IDRS. The methods and measures used in the IDRS have been described in detail elsewhere (Stafford and Burns, 2012). In short, people who inject drugs regularly were recruited into the study by a mix of advertising at services (e.g. needle and syringe programmes), word-of-mouth promotion and snowballing. Eligible participants (at least 18 years of age who reported injecting at least monthly in the six months prior to interview and residing in their recruitment city for 12 months prior to interview) were administered a structured questionnaire that collected information on participant demographics, patterns of lifetime and recent drug use, perceptions of price, purity and

availability of various illicit drugs, health indicators and social factors.

Consistent with trends over recent years, the mean age of the sample has continued to increase. The mean age was 41 in 2012, up from 40 in 2011 and 37 in 2010.

More than two-thirds of the sample were male, and virtually all reported English as the main language spoken at home. Just one respondent identified as ATSI. A more detailed breakdown of demographic data in the sample is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the WA 2011 & 2012 IDRS samples

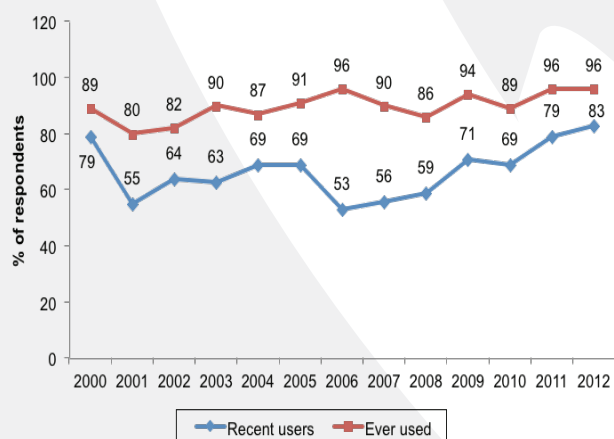
	2011 (n=70)	2012 (n=100)
Male %	57	68
Mean age %	40	41
English speaking %	99	98
Mean years of school	10	11
ATSI %	4	1
Heterosexual %	83	87
Unemployed %	70	79
Mean weekly income	\$465	\$414
In treatment %	59	41
Ever in Prison %	42	58

(source: WA IDRS interviews)

FINDINGS

A history of having ever used heroin remained unchanged from 2011 at 96%. Having used the drug in the last six months was reported by 83% of the sample, the highest figure recorded to date, and exceeding even pre – shortage data (Figure 1).

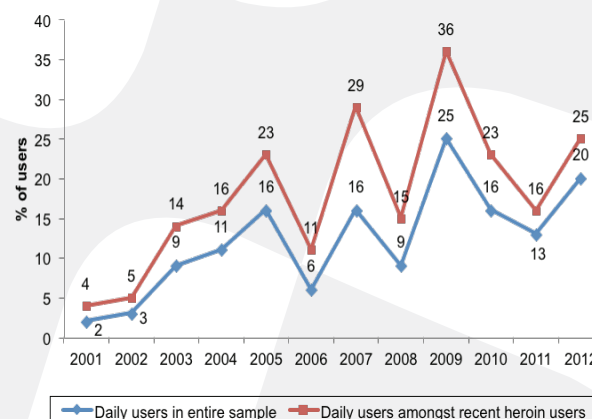
Figure 1: Ever and recent use of heroin by WA, 2000-2012



(source: WA IDRS interviews)

In addition to an increased number of recent users, the mean number of days on which heroin had been used in the last six months had increased from 72 the previous year to 93, the second highest figure recorded since the onset of the shortage in 2001. Whilst there has been year-to-year variability, Figure 2 shows the overall trend has been a gradual increase since 2002. In 2012, 25% of these recent heroin users were using on a daily basis compared with just 16% in 2011.

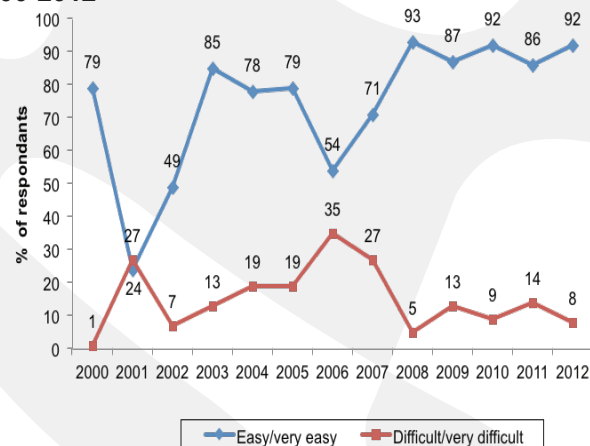
Figure 2: Number of daily heroin users, 2001-2012



(source: WA IDRS interviews)

Self-reports of heroin availability are probably the most unreliable market indicator in drug surveys like the IDRS as they are often dependent on recent experiences. This is apparent in the graph below where 92% of the 2012 sample described access to the drug as either “easy” or “very easy” which is higher than the pre-shortage levels. Whilst it is unlikely heroin is as available as it was prior to the shortage, it is noteworthy that 2012 is the fifth year running in which the ease of obtaining heroin is rated so high (Figure 3).

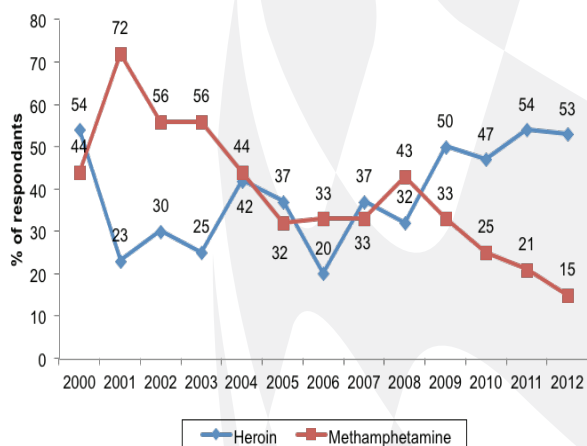
Figure 3: Ease of obtaining heroin by user report, 2000-2012



(source: WA IDRS interviews)

Data on the drug most injected in the month prior to interview among the IDRS samples shows that heroin has been more frequently injected than methamphetamine for four consecutive years (Figure 4). Furthermore, 74% of the 2012 sample cited heroin as their “drug of choice”, an unprecedented level even when compared to pre-shortage IDRS data.

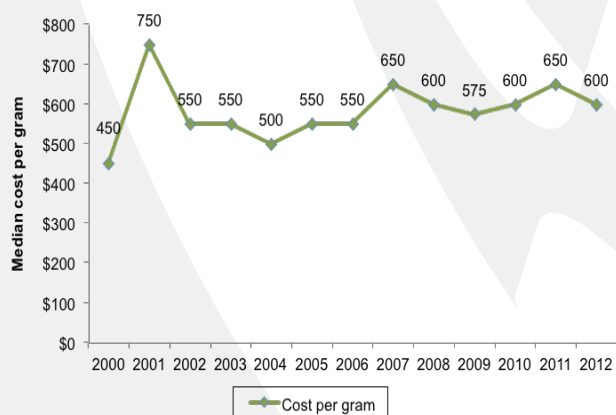
Figure 4: Drug most injected in month prior to interview, 2000-2012



(source: WA IDRS interviews)

Nevertheless, there are likely some factors currently preventing a return to levels of heroin use seen in Perth in the late 90s. Price has fallen substantially from its 2001 peak of \$750. However, with a median price of \$600 per gram, heroin remains prohibitively expensive, with small numbers of respondents reporting prices as high as \$1000 per gram (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Median price per gram of heroin, 2000-2012

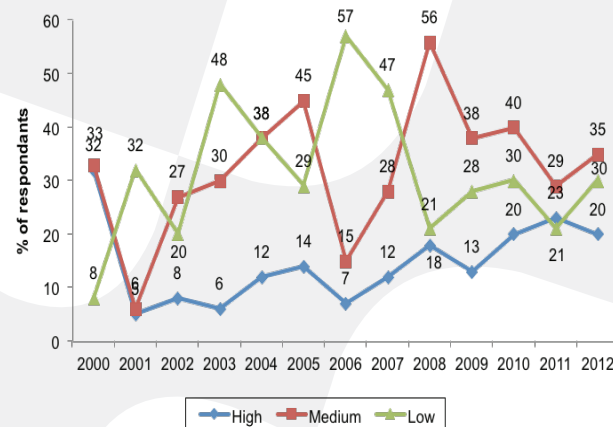


(source: WA IDRS interviews)

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Perth heroin market, as reflected in the IDRS data, which has remained substantially unchanged since the shortage is user-reported purity. User reports of high purity remain the least commonly reported category,

nominated by just 20% of respondents (Figure 6). This may explain why, despite increases in the use of the drug, just 18% of the 2012 sample reported a recent heroin overdose, compared with 33% in 2000.

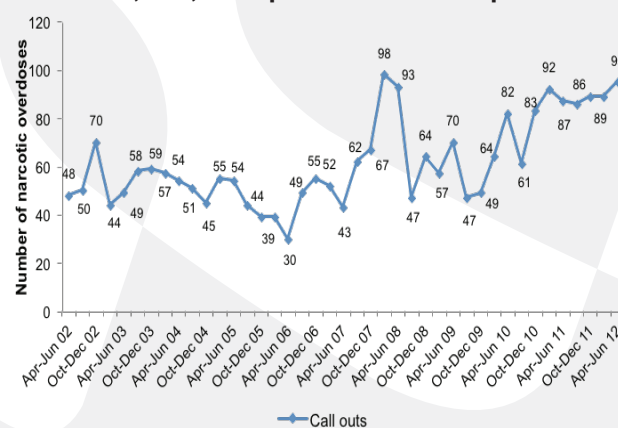
Figure 6: Heroin purity by user report, 2000-2012



(source: WA IDRS interviews)

Nevertheless, data obtained from St John Ambulance (Figure 7) indicate that the number of narcotic overdoses attended between October 2011 and June 2012 to have been the highest recorded in some time.

Figure 7: Number of ambulance callouts to narcotic overdoses, WA, 2nd quarter 2002-2nd quarter 2012

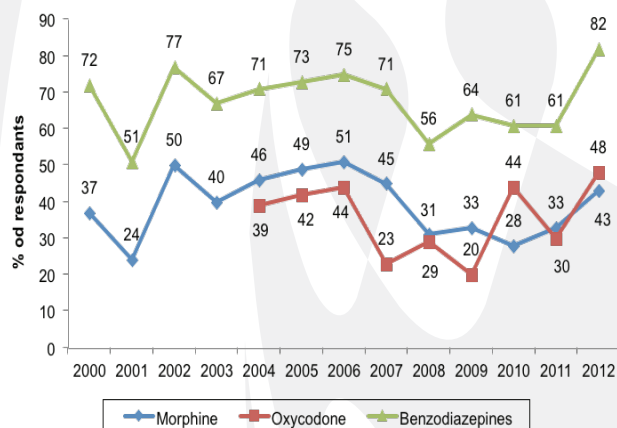


(source: St John Ambulance, WA)

It is likely that to some degree this increase in narcotic overdoses despite the absence of high purity heroin has been driven by the increased levels of use of other opioids such as illicit morphine and illicit oxycodone over the last three years (Figure 8). Also of note is the steep increase in the recent use of any benzodiazepines in the last year in Western Australia. Whilst it is not possible to say whether this increased use of benzodiazepines has occurred in the drug use situations which have led to these overdoses, concurrent use of opioids and other CNS depressants, notably benzodiazepines and alcohol, have for a long time been known to

contribute to heroin-related overdoses (Darke and Hall, 2003). We note that in Victoria the benzodiazepine alprazolam (Xanax) was detected in 28% of heroin related deaths in 2010 (Rintoul et al., 2013).

Figure 8: Recent use of any benzodiazepines, illicit morphine and illicit oxycodone



(source: WA IDRS interviews)

CONCLUSION

The various IDRS data examined in this bulletin are consistent with the heroin market in Perth continuing to undergo a gradual recovery in terms of numbers using, number of days of use, and heroin being the sample's drug of choice and most injected substance. On the other hand overall heroin purity remains low and price relatively high. But with heroin by far the drug of choice among this sample should heroin purity fluctuations continue, overall heroin purity and availability further increase, or the availability and use of prescription opioids by PWIDs continue to increase, opioid overdoses are also likely to grow in number.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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