



No. 1 Uses and abuses of drug law enforcement statistics

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This report is the first in a series on Trends and Issues in Australian crime and criminal justice published by the Australian Institute of Criminology. The series has been initiated by the Research and Statistics Division under the general editorship of the Assistant Director, Dr Paul Wilson. Other reports will be prepared and published in due course.

It is appropriate that the first report should deal with the issue of drug enforcement. The national campaign against drug abuse has been given a high priority by the Commonwealth and State Governments. However, as Dr Grant Wardlaw argues, one of the major problems in assessing law enforcement initiatives in this area is the lack of reliable statistics. The use and abuse of drug law enforcement statistics - recorded offences, major drug offenders, drug seizures and drug deaths - and the practical implications of such use and abuse are discussed in this, our first report.

Richard Harding
Director

An important shortcoming in the statistics released with the opening of the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) concerns the levels of drug offending in Australia. Law enforcement initiatives form an important part of the campaign and it is vital that the public, policy makers and law enforcement agencies have a comprehensive picture of drug law enforcement measures. This is particularly important because enforcement statistics are often used in a biased and unscientific manner to illustrate particular points of view in the drugs debate.

Drug Offences: the Statistics

The number of drug offences recorded by police departments has increased dramatically in recent years. In 1971-72 there were 1728 drug offences recorded in New South Wales, while in 1984-85 the number had reached 23 118 (more than 13 times the 1971-72 level). Such figures are often used to suggest that there has been an explosion in the use of illegal drugs. Although there is other evidence of an increase in such drug-taking, we must exercise

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Table 1
Recorded drug offences 1974-75 to 1983-84 (rates per 100 000 population)¹

Year	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NT	ACT	AUST
1974-75	83.6	53.1	81.7	72.5	55.8	80.5	161.5	42.8	71.6
1975-76	175.9	63.6	109.7	102.4	80.9	164.4	252.8	33.5	119.0
1976-77	188.8	98.3	124.6	82.0	151.0	157.7	353.5	69.5	140.8
1977-78	204.4	99.7	135.7	99.7	174.6	179.1	243.4	119.7	152.6
1978-79	166.3	105.5	165.7	93.1	111.8	197.1	166.1	78.1	138.2
1979-80	184.7	91.2	205.0	110.4	247.1	263.9	112.1	45.9	161.6
1980-81	207.5	114.9	253.2	160.9	247.6	307.8	135.5	40.5	189.1
1981-82	265.3	156.4	320.6	145.9	263.1	385.5	128.5	66.2	233.9
1982-83	285.2	182.7	420.5	192.4	373.4	317.7	174.4	53.9	275.8
1983-84	343.8	186.7	523.7	263.3	508.9	406.0	289.6	66.2	335.8

¹ Rates calculated from offences recorded in police department annual reports and estimates of population published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The offence categories included are possession or use of illegal drugs; selling or trafficking in illegal drugs; cultivation or manufacture of illegal drugs; other drugs-related offences, e.g altering a prescription, possession of instruments for use of drugs, etc. The precise terminology of the charge varies with jurisdiction.

great care in using enforcement statistics as a basis for estimating the size of the increase. The problem is that enforcement statistics in this field are largely a measure of *police activity* and may bear no direct relation to changes in the magnitude of drug use. For most categories of crime, offences are recorded largely as a result of citizen reports to the police. For drug crime, however, offences come to notice overwhelmingly as a result of police investigations. Therefore, the more effort police devote to drugs, the more drug offences will be detected. In fact, it is conceivable that recorded drug offences could increase while the actual abuse in the community decreases or remains stable. While this does not seem to be the case in Australia, estimates of levels of illegal drug use made by State and Territory Drug and Alcohol Authorities or Health Departments on the basis of surveys, data on drug-related deaths, and other indicators suggest that the rate of increase has been nowhere near as great as the increase in recorded drug offences would suggest. The actual number of drug offences recorded is also not a very useful indicator over time because it does not necessarily reflect changes in the population size. A more useful statistic is the rate of offending per 100 000 population. This allows comparisons over time and between jurisdictions. Table 1 shows the rates of recorded drug offences per

100 000 population for all Australian jurisdictions for the period 1974-75 to 1983-84.

This table produces some very interesting findings. First, drug offence rates vary considerably across the country. In 1983-84 the highest rates are found in Queensland (523.7) and South Australia (508.9). New South Wales, commonly regarded as having the most serious illegal drug problem in Australia by virtue of its population and being the entry point for a large proportion of illegal drugs, is ranked fourth, after Tasmania, in rates of recorded drug offences. New South Wales is followed by the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Victoria and finally the Australian Capital Territory (which currently has a rate below that found in most jurisdictions in 1974-75).

All jurisdictions show an increase in rates of recorded drug offences over the period 1974-75 to 1983-84, but the size of the increases varies dramatically from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Thus, South Australia's rate increased by a factor of 9, that of Queensland by 6, Tasmania by 5, New South Wales by 4, Western Australia by 3.6, Victoria by 3.5, the Northern Territory by 0.8, and the Australian Capital Territory by 0.5. The range both of absolute rates and changes in rates illustrates that the figures are significantly influenced by the amount of resources or attention being paid to drugs by different police departments. It is impossible from

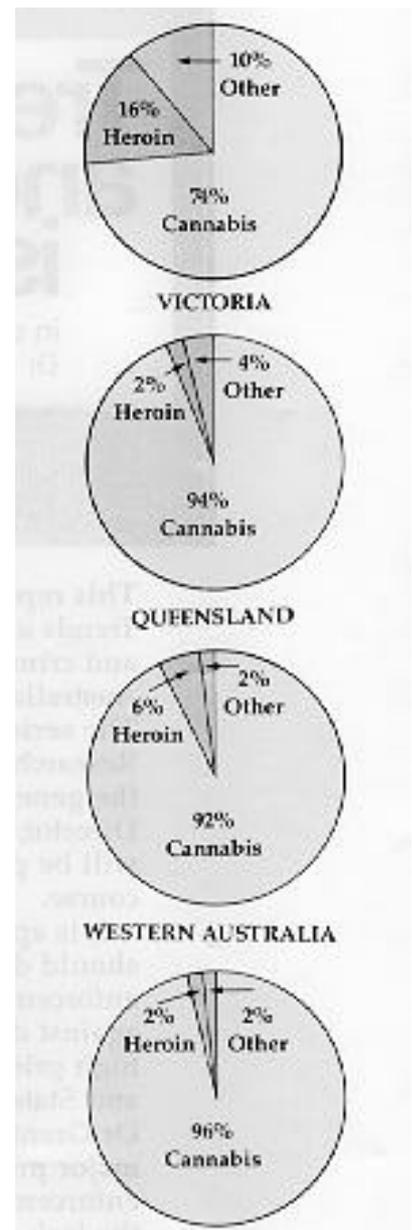
these figures to judge the actual change in illegal drug use levels.

Getting The Drug Pusher

In recent years there has been an increased emphasis in statements from police forces on the desirability of arresting drug pushers rather than drug users. As a consequence, it is the official policy of a number of drug squads to concentrate resources on making cases against pushers. Although some squads have had some success in targeting offenders who are selling drugs, the reality is that most

Figure 1

Percentage of drug offences involving cannabis, heroin and cocaine use 1983-84



arrests still relate to simple possession or use of drugs. Partly this is because most arrests for drug offences are made by police outside the drug squad, but even in specialised units the arrest of users still predominates. For example, in the financial year 1984-85 there were 14 071 drug offences proceeded with by the Queensland Police Department. In this period, the Queensland Police Drug Squad laid 1059 drug-related charges, of which 461 (or 43.5 per cent) related to selling drugs (Queensland police department, *Annual report*, 1985). Similarly, in 1984-85 there were 23 118 accepted reports of drug offences in New South Wales. In this period, the drug squad and its successor, the Drug Law Enforcement Bureau laid 5878 charges (New South Wales Police Department, *Annual Report*, 1985 - it is not clear from the report if all these charges related to drugs, but the majority would have done so). Of these charges, 1024 (or 17.4 per cent) related to supply of drugs. Some police annual reports do not provide information on the type of offences involved with drugs. However, Table 2 shows that the percentage of offences related to selling or supplying drugs for those which do.

It should be noted that most of these offences do not relate to the 'Mr Bigs' of the drug trade. Although the statistics give no indication of size of the drug sale alleged, in fact the majority of offences involve only small quantities of drugs - often enough only for one person's individual consumption.

An interesting trend emerging from Table 2 is that while the percentage of drug selling offences has always been under 10 per cent in the large jurisdictions, it is much higher in the small ones. In particular, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory record substantial percentages of offences relating to the sale of drugs. It seems obvious, then, that *most arrests for drug offences in Australia continue to be for possession or use of drugs*. Since

Table 2

Percentage of recorded drug offences involving selling or supplying drugs 1974-75 to 1983-84

Year	NSW	QLD	SA	TAS	NT	ACT
1974-75	6.23	5.87	8.70	12.46		
1975-76	5.55	4.92	4.33	21.32		
1976-77	5.74	6.01	0.68	14.49		
1977-78	7.67		2.48	11.82		
1978-79	8.56		1.13	9.68		
1979-80	5.76		2.66	9.16		
1980-81	5.75	8.22	2.79	15.82		6.52
1981-82	6.78	6.09	5.79	10.33	48.91	22.52
1982-83	7.89	6.03	5.80	12.52	27.39	21.60
1983-84	8.36	6.13	5.47	12.63	28.57	19.75

Source: Police annual reports

these arrests essentially are untargeted, geographically widespread and constitute a small proportion of users (since predominantly they relate to the drug cannabis - see next section), *it is unlikely that this pattern of drug law enforcement can have a significant impact on the amount of illegal drug use in this country*.

Most Offences Relate to Cannabis

While the major concern of the Australian community is concentrated on drugs such as heroin and cocaine, the vast majority of drug offences in Australia actually relate to cannabis. While the number of offence involving heroin and cocaine has risen over the past few years, the percentage of total offences relating to these drugs has remained very low indeed. Figure 1 shows the percentages for the years 1983-84 for those jurisdictions which publish the information in their annual reports. As the figures show, only in Victoria have police detected a significant percentage of offences involving heroin. The percentage of offences involving cocaine is so small as to have little significance at this time. Although there is evidence that cocaine availability and use are increasing in Australia, offences relating to it are very difficult to detect because of the nature of its sale. Heroin offences are somewhat less difficult to detect, but relatively few still come to police attention. Cannabis offences are relatively easy to detect but often involve only small quantities of the drug. Many offences are detected only incidentally (as part

of investigations into other matters). Given the widespread nature of cannabis use, offences detected represent only a very small proportion indeed of actual instances of use. *It is unlikely, therefore, that the pattern of drug law enforcement in Australia is having much impact on the rate of use of any particular drug*. It is possible that police activity in Victoria is more precisely targeted on heroin and may have a greater chance of interrupting the trade in that drug there.

Drug Seizures

Statistics on the amount of illegal drugs seized by law enforcement authorities are another indicator of changes in availability of drugs. Interpretation of these statistics is difficult, however, because as with drug offence data generally they reflect enforcement activity as well as actual changes in availability. Thus, if community concern results in more resources being placed into drug law enforcement, more offences will be detected, even if the rate of offending does not change.

Table 3 shows the changes which have taken place between 1980 and 1985 in amounts of drugs seized at the point of entry into Australia by the Australian Customs Service.

Although the trend in these figures is clearly an upwards one, the large variations from year to year for each drug type illustrate the difficulties of trying to estimate availability of drugs from data on Customs seizures. Figures may be inflated in a particular year by the seizure of one or more

Table 3 Drug seizures by Australian Customs 1980-85

Drug (kg)	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Heroin	5.4	3.9	26.4	72.3	58.4	51.4
Cocaine	6.9	0.05	2.9	8.8	12.7	14.7
Cannabis	657.8	944.1	3496.0	2283.0	4675.0	1961.0

very large shipments. They are very dependent on changes in the quality of the intelligence information which underpins targeted seizures or in simple good luck which results in random finds of drug importation attempts. It does seem clear, however, that the amount of cocaine entering Australia is increasing.

he seizure data also illustrate how enforcement statistics frequently tend to be quoted partially. For example, many commentators in 1982 and 1983 pointed to the significant rise in heroin seizures as evidence of corresponding increases in either availability of heroin or levels of heroin use. However, nowhere was it claimed that the substantial decreases in 1984 and 1985 were evidence that heroin was becoming less of a problem. In fact, of course, *to be able to make accurate estimates of drug use we need comprehensive data over an adequate period of time and not data from single sources from particular years. Such data currently are not collected in Australia.*

Deaths Due to Illegal Drug Use

While it is very difficult to estimate the rate of use of illegal drugs, the number of deaths caused by illegal drug use is a particular indirect measure which can be used to provide a context within which to view enforcement statistics. Figure 2 shows the deaths associated with opiate (principally heroin) use in Australia expressed as rates per 100 000 population for the period 1974 to 1984. This graph shows a general increase in the death rate associated with opiate use over a period when death rates associated with drug use generally (principally tobacco and alcohol) began to fall. (The only other category of drug use associated with

increased death rates was barbiturate use, which increased from a rate of 0.2 per 100 000 population in 1974 to 0.7 in 1984). *These statistics indicate that there is a growing heroin problem, but they do not indicate the size of the problem. They do, however, indicate that it is probably not growing at the speed which enforcement statistics would indicate.* They also provide a warning about the difficulty of using such figures to build a case about how bad the situation has become. For example, if 1974 is taken as the base year, the problem has multiplied by a factor of 2.5 over the period to 1984. However, if the *next* year, 1975, is taken as the base year, the problem had worsened by a factor of 3.75 by 1984. If 1976 is taken as the base, the problem had grown by a factor of 5 by 1984. Clearly, we need to take a long-term view and be wary of claims based on selected statistics. *It should also be remembered that in 1984 the actual number of opiate-related deaths was 229 out of a total of 20 232 drug-related deaths in Australia.*

The Lack of Drug Data In Australia

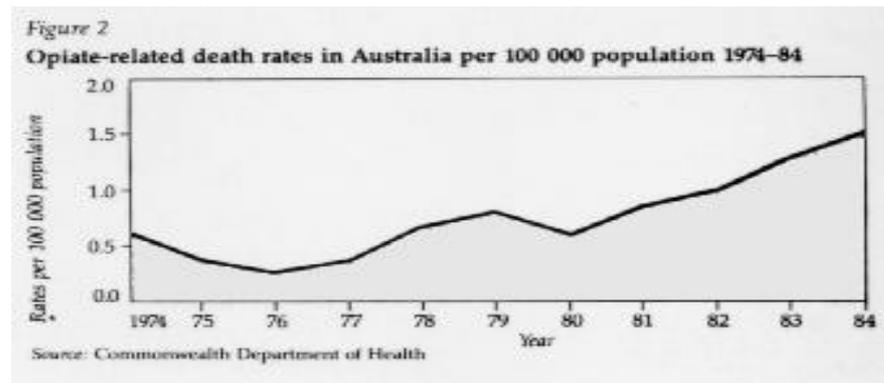
Given the confidence with which many people make estimates about the nature and dimensions of illegal drug use in Australia, it is amazing how little detailed information is

actually available. Obviously, an examination of statistics on drug offence, drug seizures and drug related deaths, together with the fragmentary survey material available on illegal drug use, indicates an increasing problem in this country. However, it is simply not possible on the basis of such figures to make reliable estimates of the number of users of illegal drugs, the size of the habits, or the amount of money spent on illegal drugs. Consequently, it is also impossible to make reliable estimates of the amount of crime which is drug-related or the impact of drug law enforcement strategies. A rational drug control policy demands that such data be available. The development of the National Drug Information Centre within the Commonwealth Health Department and the Australian Drug Data Base within the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence will help fill this gap.

It remains, however, somewhat surprising that this country could launch a \$100 million National Campaign Against Drug Abuse and that so many extra resources and powers should be granted to law enforcement bodies in the absence of any real knowledge of the size of the illegal drug problem.

Conclusions

Statistics on drug law enforcement in Australia are inadequate and incomplete. They cannot be used as direct indicators of the size of the illegal drug problem. Increases in



recorded drug offences in recent years are influenced significantly by the amount of attention paid to drug detection by police and there is no way of estimating how these figures reflect actual changes in levels of drug use. Drug enforcement statistics do, however, show the following:

The vast majority of offences recorded relate to cannabis and not to drugs such as heroin and cocaine which are the focus of most public concern. The only exception to this finding is Victoria, where a significant proportion of offences involve heroin.

Although official policy encourages a focus on drug dealers rather than users, the over whelming percentage of offences recorded relate to simple possession or use of drugs. The exceptions to this finding are the small jurisdictions, the Northern Territory and the Australia Capital Territory, and to a lesser extent, Tasmania, where drug selling offences make up a significant proportion of recorded offences. Even here, however, most offences involve the sale of only small amounts of drugs and do not involve major traffickers. It should also be noted that a special organisations such as the Commonwealth/NSW Joint Task Force on Drug Trafficking, the National Crime Authority, and the NSW Drug Crimes Commission have a specific mandate to target traffickers. It is too early to evaluate the latter two bodies, but the Task Force has succeeded in prosecuting some major traffickers. The ease with which these individuals seem to be able to be replaced within their organisations or to have their organisations replaced by others means that these arrests have probably had little impact on levels of illegal drug use.

Informed debate on drug issues and proper evaluation of law enforcement policies are not possible until we increase the range and quality of data collected on illegal drug use and strategies to control it. Although this is a complex and difficult area, the methodologies exist to gather

information of the sort which would allow us to make much more precise estimates of the dimensions of the drug problem in Australia.

Comprehensive data could be collected from drug treatment agencies. National and local surveys of specific populations could be conducted to assess reported levels of drug use (as has been done, for example, in New South Wales with surveys of high school students). Observational studies could be conducted in drug-using communities to assess drug market behaviour, sizes of habits, the sources of income for drug users and costs of drug habits. (Such studies have reached a high stage of sophistication in overseas cities such as New York and London.) With such information our drug control policies could be constructed on a firm and factual base and could realistically be evaluated.



Inquiries about the Trends and Issues series should be forwarded to:
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