



No.109

# Linking Drugs & Criminal Activity: Developing an Integrated Monitoring System

Toni Makkai

*Data are the foundation on which public policy is based. Good policy requires good information. Unfortunately, in many policy areas, data are not adequate and policymakers often have to "fly blind". Criminal justice policy, and especially illicit drug policy, often suffers from poor data. As a result, where we invest our limited resources, and what differences they make in the long run, are often the product of hunch rather than fact.*

*At the Australian Institute of Criminology, we are committed to improving the quality of data in criminal justice. Our work on Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA), discussed below, is an example of how we contribute knowledge for policy. This Trends and Issues discusses this and some of the other means by which Australian data on illicit drugs and their relationship to criminal activity might be improved.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

**D**uring the 1970s and 1980s there was a concerted research effort in the United States to examine the links between illicit drug use and criminal activity (used here to refer to non-drug-related crime such as property and violent offending, NOT drug-related crime such as trafficking and possession of illicit substances). Many might argue that Australia does not need empirical data on this issue. What is required is action in the form of intervention: be it more treatment, drug courts or more police on our streets and our borders. However, for interventions to be successful they need to be targeted in the appropriate manner and then evaluated to determine their level of success. Without the basic empirical data targeting can never be effective, nor can rigorous evaluations of interventions be conducted. To move toward evidence based policy making and policing, the collection of basic research data is essential.

This paper seeks first to examine the utility of our national statistical collections; second, to focus on national specialised collections; and finally, to suggest ways to build upon current research collections to enhance the capacity of policy makers at all levels of government to tackle the problem of drugs and criminal activity.

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## National Statistical Collections

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There are on the surface several obvious sources of data on crime and illicit drugs: police, courts, corrections and treatment agency records. These records are the basis for reporting requirements on what agencies are doing with taxpayer money, rather than research data collected specifically for the purpose of describing or understanding involvement in criminal activities.

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE  
OF CRIMINOLOGY

*trends*  
&  
*issues*

in crime and criminal justice

April 1999

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24105 8



Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9200

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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### *Police data*

Each year the various State and Territory police agencies publish statistical profiles of their activities, including data on offences/incidents reported to police. These data are based on organisation records and as a consequence the profiles vary considerably across Australia, both in the type and amount of information published on crime. For example, depending on the quantity of the drug they possess at the time of arrest, a person in one State might be charged with trafficking but in another with possession. In addition, variables such as age are reported differently.

In theory, the data can be used to examine trends over time. For example: are break, enter and steals going up or down, or are drug offences increasing disproportionately? In practice this is also difficult, as the counting rules within jurisdictions have changed over time. As a result, the number of reported offences may have increased not because of a “real” increase but because some offences that were classified in one category are now included in another. Offences reported to the police are also a reflection of policing practices and public actions and values. Indermaur (1996) has argued that the rise in violent crime is a result of police recording practices while, over time, willingness to report certain kinds of offences such as rape and domestic violence has increased. Drug offences, particularly possession, pose special problems in that this is generally regarded as a “victimless” crime. As a result, individuals do not report being a victim of the offence, unlike robbery or assault. Most possession charges seem to be a by-product of police activity directed towards other offences, such as break, enter or steal or driving offences (Lough 1997).

Finally, the organisational data reported in this form does not link drug offences and other criminal activity. For example, at the most basic level, it is impossible to tell what proportion of drug offenders were also arrested for other offences. The more interesting question is what proportions of property offenders commit the offence to support a drug habit;

data on reported crime drawn from organisational systems cannot adequately answer this question. Many people make the assumption that, because armed robberies and other property offending are increasing at the same time as illicit drug use is becoming more widespread, the two are causally related. This may be true, but such a conclusion cannot, and should not, be automatically drawn from this type of aggregated data. It is difficult to infer individual causal activity from aggregated statistics. It is equally plausible to argue that both activities are explained by other social factors. The dilemmas of using aggregated statistics highlight the need for research data rather than data based on organisational records.

### *National crime statistics*

The problems raised previously in relation to providing comparable statistics on crime across jurisdictions resulted, in 1994, in a partnership arrangement between the Commonwealth Attorney-General, the jurisdictions and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to collect uniform crime statistics. Since the inception of the Australian partnership the ABS has produced national statistics on the number of victims of offences recorded by police for a limited number of offences. The Council of Australian Governments (SCRCSSP 1999) has highlighted that the ABS data is problematic in that it comes from police records and can either be victim or incident based. The most fundamental problem is that the current national crime statistics do not include drug offences and, even if they did, data access policies would limit their usefulness in answering the questions that really matter in terms of crime prevention and control.

Australia has pursued a model of national data collection very different from countries such as the UK and US, where national collections are decentralised under a range of departments. In terms of “crime” data, it is the Home Office rather than the National Statistical Office in the UK, and primarily the Bureau of Justice Statistics rather than the Bureau of the Census in the US that collect such data. In Australia, the ABS has a monopoly

over national data collections.

### *Court statistics*

There were no national court statistics published in Australia until August 1997, when the Australian Bureau of Statistics published the first annual data from Australian criminal courts for 1995. Jointly funded by the State and Territory court agencies, the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department and the ABS, two further reports have been produced, but only from the higher criminal courts’ records. They do not provide breakdowns by the type of offence. Thus, for the higher courts, we still do not know how many people are appearing for trafficking and dealing in illicit drugs at a national level. Magistrates’ courts, where most of the drug possession cases are heard, have no statistics compiled on a national basis.

Without some way of linking court appearances to individuals, it is impossible to determine the extent to which individuals are charged with sets of crime, such as a drug offence and a property offence. Court records serve an important administrative purpose in providing descriptive statistics on court appearances, but do not inform us about the links between drugs and other criminal activity.

### *Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence (ABCI)*

The ABCI is a cooperative arrangement of the 8 Australian police departments and reports to the Australasian Police Ministers’ Council. In 1991 it produced the first Australian Drug Intelligence Assessment and each year since then has produced a national report on illicit drugs in Australia, now called the *Australian Illicit Drug Report* (ABCI 1999). The report presents data on consumers and providers of illicit drugs, compiled from data on drug offence arrests provided by the States and Territories. Because users (consumers) are often dealers (providers) this raises complexities in terms of classifying individuals. The ABCI have established consistent counting rules where provider charges take precedence over consumer charges. Acknowledging its limitations, this

is the most authoritative source of national data on drug arrests.

This data source does not answer the question about the links between illicit drug use and other criminal activity because, again, it is based on State and Territory police administrative records. At present the collection only includes information on the age and gender of the arrestee and access to the unit record files for research purposes is not permitted under the arrangements agreed to by the States in providing the data to the ABCI. The ABCI and ABS have been working together to expand the collection to include other important socio-economic characteristics. However, all the data will be based on administrative records and all of the limitations from a research perspective will still apply.

*National Minimum Treatment Census*

Three national surveys of clients of treatment agencies were conducted in 1990, 1992 and 1995. Limited information was collected including what drugs the person was being treated for, their age, gender, employment and country of birth. As the primary focus of the collections was health, no information was collected about involvement in criminal activities and the information was taken from administrative records. Work is currently being undertaken by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to develop a minimum database on clients of treatment services. Again this data will be taken from administrative sources and will be of limited use in addressing the link between illicit drugs and criminal activity.

*National Prison Census*

This collection was begun in 1972 by the Australian Institute of Criminology and transferred to the ABS in 1994. The most important limitation of this data is that the census collects only the most serious offence rather than all offences. Thus, if a person has been convicted of a heroin possession and armed robbery, it is the latter offence that is counted. Such data are important in terms of descriptive reporting on the characteristics of prisoners and in enabling us to monitor trends over time, but again it is administrative rather than research based data and cannot tell us much about the link between illicit drug use and other criminal activity.

**Specialised Collections**

*Crime and safety surveys*

Given that organisational data cannot provide the research data needed to further our understanding of the links between illicit drug use and criminal activity at the national level, survey based data is the other major source. Since 1975 there have been four national surveys of crime victimisation. Unfortunately, over time there have been changes in question wording, shifts in interview technique and limited release of unit record data. Where these are released, the capacity to actually use the data is greatly diminished by the common ABS practices of confidentialising small cell sizes and not releasing detailed geographic indicators. The

ABS argues that it must aggregate and randomise data to preserve confidentiality, but such a process is not undertaken with similar data in either the US or UK crime victims surveys. Added to these problems is that the surveys do not collect any information on drug-related crime or activity.

*National Drug Strategy surveys*

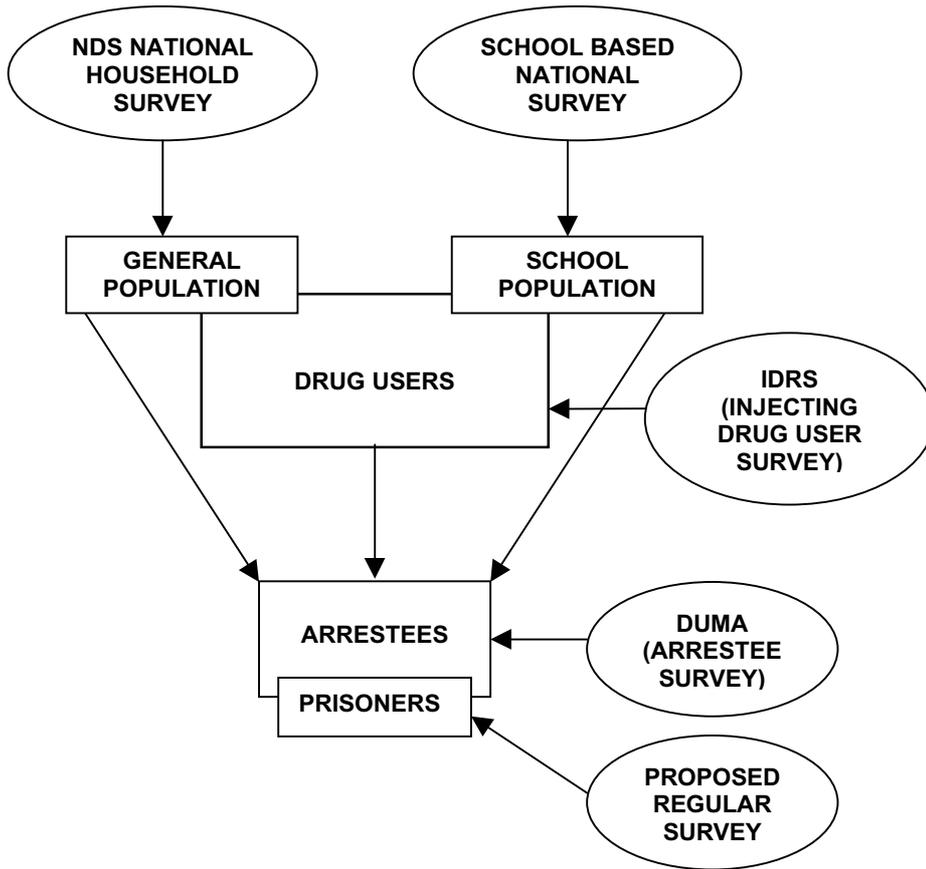
With the inception of the National Drug Strategy in 1985 the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, as it now is, funded a national survey to determine the level of licit and illicit drug use amongst the general population. This monitoring tool is based on the US Household Survey of Drug Abuse that is conducted annually (Makkai 1994). Table 1 indicates the years and the sample sizes of this collection. The questionnaire includes detailed questions on illicit drug use; however, as it focuses on an activity in which relatively few people engage, its usefulness is limited by the small sample size. In recognition of this, the 1998 survey was increased in size to just over 10,000 persons (Williams 1999).

Limited questions were included in 1993 and 1995 about involvement in drug-related disorder and crime as well as perceptions about experiencing such activity (Makkai 1997, 1998). An attempt was made in the 1998 survey to include the standard self-reported criminal activity scale used in the US survey. These data would have provided a baseline on the extent of involvement in such activity for both the drug-using and non-drug-using population. Unfor-

**Table 1: The 1985–98 National Drug Strategy surveys**

Year	Data Collection	Fieldwork	Sample Coverage	Sample Size	Interview Technique
1985	Reark Research	Nov-Dec	Quota sample, urban population centres of 5,000+, aged 14+	2,791	Personal interview
1988	Australian Market Research	Mar-Apr	Random sample, urban population centres of 5,000+, aged 14+	2,255	Personal interview, sealed self-completion booklet
1993	AGB McNair	Mar-Apr	Random sample, population aged 14+	3,500	Personal interview, sealed self-completion booklet
1995	AGB McNair	May-Jun	Random sample, population aged 14+	3,850	Personal interview, sealed self-completion booklet
1998	Roy Morgan Research (managed by AIHW)	June-Sep	Random sample, population aged 14+	10,030	Personal interview, sealed self-completion booklet; leave behind self-completed booklet

Figure 1: Integrated monitoring system



Unfortunately the questions were not included; only specific self-reported crime questions were asked of illicit drug users. The problem is that, without the control group, it is impossible to know whether the level of such activity is higher, the same or lower than for those not engaged in illicit drug use.

*School surveys*

At various times surveys of drug use amongst school children have been conducted. In theory these collections provide national data; in practice data from different States have been released at different times. In addition the data are rarely made available for secondary analyses although these surveys could provide information on self-reported criminal and delinquent activity and illicit drug use amongst an important group within the community – the young – at a national level. Recent work on the New South Wales data has shown how the school surveys can enhance our understanding of involvement in drug and crime markets amongst our young people (Baker 1998).

*Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS)*

This collection brings together a range of indicators about illicit drug use in Australia. It was begun in Sydney in 1996 and in 1998 was extended to Melbourne and Adelaide (McKetin et al. 1998). The plan is to extend the system to all capital cities in 1999. There are three primary sources of data:

- key informant interviews;
- key indicator data (i.e. arrest data for drug offences, ambulance data, toxicology data and drug and alcohol agency data); and
- an annual survey of injecting drug users.

The main benefit of IDRS is that it brings together data from a number of different sources so that conclusions do not rely on single sources of information. Its core activity is to monitor issues relevant to health, so the link between drugs and crime is largely limited to three questions asked in the annual survey of injecting drug users. Users are asked the extent to which they have committed a property, violent or fraud offence in the past month. It is important to recognise that not all injecting drug

users commit crimes to support their drug use habits; many do not (Makkai 1999).

*Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA)*

This collection is quarterly and involves voluntary interviews with individuals who have been brought into designated police stations within the previous 48 hours. The pilot system began in January 1999 in two police stations in Queensland and Western Australia. Police stations in Sydney will be included later in the year. The collection is designed to:

- monitor when self-reported drug use is going up or down with cross-validation from urinalysis tests;
- determine the extent to which individuals have been using illicit drugs at the time of the arrest;
- determine the nature of the illicit drug market;
- measure the demand for treatment amongst this sentinel group;
- provide a mechanism for supplementary surveys, enabling more detailed studies of specific aspects of the illicit drug market and criminality.

**Improving Our Knowledge Base**

Administrative collections such as police and court records are not designed to explain why things happen, but to describe the current situation. When a range of administrative systems are linked it is possible to undertake much more powerful and useful research from a policy perspective. However, even this data will not tell us why people do the things they do, about the dynamics of the criminal and drug market in which they are involved or about the extent to which individuals are intoxicated with illicit substances when they commit the offence. It is just not feasible, nor desirable, to redesign administrative data collection systems for these purposes. To understand the links between illicit drug use and crime the focus should be on more specialised collections and adapting these to

**Table 2: Potential sources of crime and illicit drug use data for an integrated monitoring system**

Collection	Data Collector	Funding Agency	Group	Data Collection Period	Method Collection	Drug Use Collection Method	Criminal Activity Collection Method	Benefits
NDS household surveys	Market research companies	Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care	General population	Every 2-3 years	Face to face interviews and self-completion	Self-report	Self-report	Population based estimates on illicit drug use and self-reported offending
School based surveys	Managed by Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer	Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care	Young people	Every couple of years	Self-completion	Self-report	Self-report	Estimates of illicit drug use and self-reported offending amongst young people
IDRS (Illicit Drug Reporting System)	Managed by NDARC in collaboration with other drug and alcohol agencies in the collection sites	Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care	Injecting drug users	Annual	Face to face interviews	Self-report	Self-report	Estimates of idus in community; self-reported use of drugs and type, impact of policing; self-reported criminal activity; treatment demands
DUMA (Drug Use Monitoring in Australia)	Managed by AIC collaborating with local law enforcement and research agencies in the collection sites	National Illicit Drug Strategy	Arrestees	Four times a year	Face to face interviews	Self-report and urinalysis	Self-report and official records	Directly links arrest and illicit drug use; urinalysis; indicators of drug market; treatment demands
Proposed annual prisons survey	???	???	Property and violent offenders	Annual	Face to face interviews	Self-report	Self-report and official records	Criminal and illicit drug using career; self-reported link between drug use and criminal activities; treatment demands

policy purposes.

In addition a long-term commitment is required to a few, but appropriately funded, specialised collections that are adaptable and stable monitoring systems. *Stable* in the sense that they provide on-going monitoring of the problem, and *adaptable* in that law enforcement can use these to address concerns specific to the moment. Currently there are four collections in place that need to be further developed, refined and integrated to address the drug-crime link: the national household survey; the school based surveys; the survey of injecting drug users (IDRS); and the quarterly monitoring of arrestees (DUMA). In addition to this, an annual survey of prisoners providing detailed information on their criminal and drug-using careers is required. Figure 1 shows the way in which these data collection systems could potentially form an integrated monitoring program providing data to enable national policy initiatives to be developed and evaluated.

How can these specialised collections be adapted so that they provide relevant data for policy purposes? From a policy perspective better data on self-reported involvement in criminal and drug activities at both population level and amongst our young is required. The national household survey and the school based surveys can provide this information provided that they occur at regular intervals; that consistent and appropriate questions are included; and that the data are made available for secondary analyses. These surveys will provide indicators in the general population of:

- the level of illicit drug use and its changes over time;
- the extent to which it is linked to self-reported offending;
- the factors that differentiate between those who have never used, those who have used but now ceased and those who continue to use;
- the important risk/protective factors.

However, these surveys can never be large enough to provide detailed information about those intimately involved in the illicit

drug market. Some data can be provided by the IDRS system. Indicators of the drug market, police activity and treatment can be collected from the survey of injecting drug users (IDUs). However the core focus of the IDU survey is on health related issues and only a sub-group of IDUs are involved in criminal activities (Makkai 1999). It might be tempting to expand the collection to include the technical questions required to obtain more detailed information on criminal activity, but this approach could jeopardise the collection in two ways: making the questionnaire instrument longer could result in greater refusals to participate, reducing sample size; and changing the focus of the interview could affect responses. For example, analysis of the self-reported drug component of the British Crime Survey indicates underreporting of drug use as the survey changes the focus from being a victim to being a perpetrator (Makkai & McAllister 1997).

Detailed information on criminal offending and the role of illicit drug use will come from the DUMA system, which allows a clearer focus on the link between criminal activity and illicit drug use, as well as enabling evaluation of local law enforcement initiatives. Although the drug problem is a local one, it is also part of a global enterprise. DUMA is affiliated with other sites in other countries (including the US and UK) so it will provide comparable data across both Australian jurisdictions and internationally.

Targeting resources in the criminal justice system to prevent, deter, reduce and control crime requires access to better and more complete research data. The issue of data quality has become so critical in the United States that the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy recently requested the National Research Council to investigate the problem. A Committee on Data and Research for Policy on Illegal Drugs has been convened to study, over the next 30 months, the problems with existing data sources and recent research studies that support policy analysis. Our capacity to provide a strong theoretical and information base on illicit drugs and crime to

guide policy decisions requires us to:

- examine our current sources of data;
- ensure that consistent and quality data is collected; and
- encourage policy relevant research that utilises such data (see Table 2).

The utilisation of such data raises important policy questions about the sharing and release of data. Unlike the United States, in Australia researchers and data collection agencies are rarely required to make their data available for secondary analysis. In addition, privacy laws, ethics committees and issues about confidentiality currently militate against access to individual level research data. Without access to data, researchers face the prospect of using publicly released unit record data from the US and the UK to provide answers to problems in Australia.

In conclusion, Table 2 indicates that a number of specialised collections are currently in place. The next step is to develop their potential, integrate the systems where possible and commit to their long-term future. If there is one missing piece of the jigsaw it is an on-going national survey of prisoners. Each of these collections will provide a tiny piece of the jigsaw that analysts can use for targeting and evaluation of the effectiveness of drug policy. However, these systems will need to be supplemented from time to time with one-off studies of specific issues that may arise.

A full reference list can be found on the Institute's web site at: <http://www.aic.gov.au>

Dr Toni Makkai is a Research Analyst at the Australian Institute of Criminology.



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:  
 Dr Adam Graycar, Director  
 Australian Institute of Criminology  
 GPO Box 2944  
 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia