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**Abstract** | This bulletin provides new data on the prevalence of fentanyl use among a sample of Australian police detainees. A survey of 1,044 detainees conducted under the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program in 2018 found that three percent of detainees reported having used fentanyl in the past 12 months. The same proportion of detainees interviewed in 2016 reported having used the drug. The most common reason that detainees started to use fentanyl was that it had been prescribed for medical reasons. Seventy-one percent of frequent users had engaged in non-medical use of fentanyl. Most of these users were given fentanyl by their family and friends.

## Fentanyl use by police detainees remains unchanged

Tom Sullivan and Eileen Patterson

Fentanyl is a powerful opioid prescribed for severe pain that can also be used for non-medical purposes. Recent data suggest the extent of fentanyl use varies across Australia, with elevated consumption levels in some regional areas (ACIC 2018). This bulletin describes fentanyl use in a sample of police detainees.

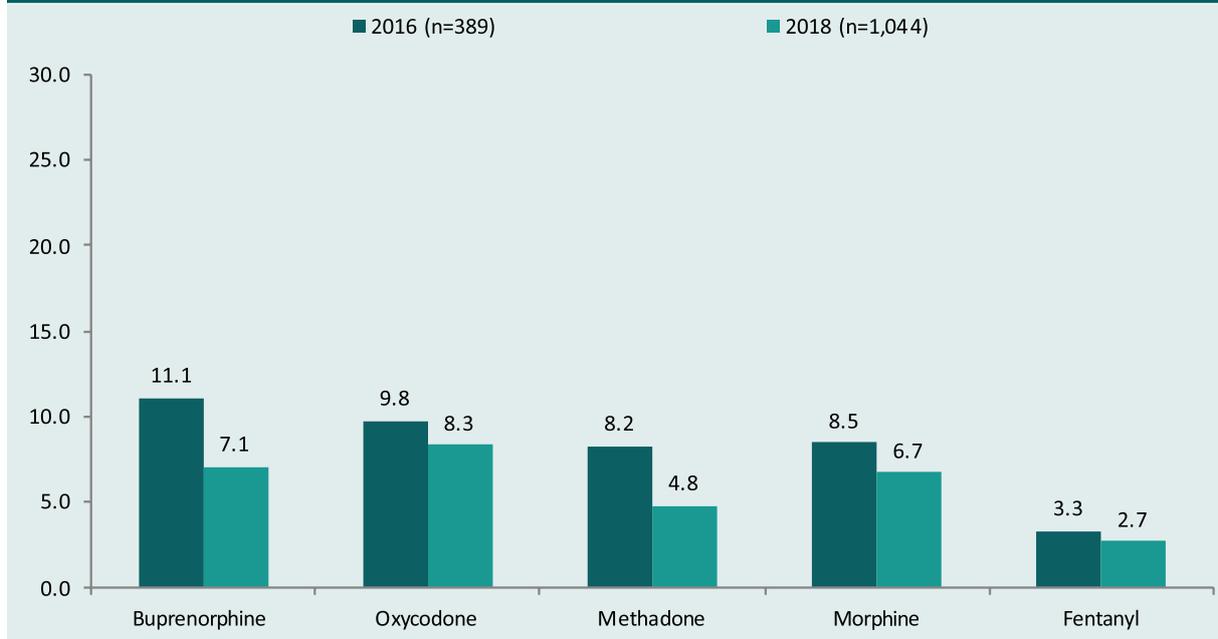
### Method

The bulletin draws on data from the Australian Institute of Criminology's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program. DUMA collects drug use, criminal offending and socio-demographic data from individuals detained by police at selected police stations and watch houses in Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide and Sydney. This paper uses data collected in a special addendum to the main DUMA survey in January/February and April/May 2018, and includes further analysis of similar data collected for a 2016 study (Sullivan, Ticehurst & Bricknell 2018). The addendum asked 1,044 detainees about their prescribed and non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids, including fentanyl. 'Non-medical use' is the consumption of fentanyl without a valid prescription using illegitimate methods. This includes detainees who reported 'doctor shopping' or exaggerating symptoms to their doctors to get more fentanyl.

## Results

Three percent of detainees interviewed in 2018 reported having used fentanyl in the last 12 months (n=28). Similarly, three percent of a previous police detainee sample (n=13) interviewed in 2016 reported having used fentanyl in the last 12 months (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Detainees who reported using pharmaceutical opioids, by drug and year (%)**



Note: Base was the total number of detainees in the sample. In 2018, the addenda also asked about prevalence of using codeine (24%; n=252), tramadol (9%; n=94), pethidine (<1%; n=5) and 'other' opioids (4%; n=41). None of the changes was statistically significant

Source: AIC DUMA collection Q1 2016 and Q1 & Q2 2018 [computer file]

Five percent of female detainees (n=8) and two percent of male detainees (n=20) reported having used fentanyl in 2018. Most fentanyl users were aged 36 years or over (54%; n=15) and the median age of users was 36 years (mean=35; range: 19–51), only slightly older than the average age of the total population of adult detainees interviewed (median=33; mean=34; range: 18–77). The same proportions of Indigenous (3%; n=6) and non-Indigenous detainees (3%; n=22) reported fentanyl use. Sixty-four percent of fentanyl users (n=18) reported being unemployed, a higher rate than among the general detainee sample (53%; n=637). Similarly, a greater proportion of fentanyl users (86%; n=24) reported having received government benefits in the past 30 days than the general detainee population (65%; n=708).

The median age detainees first used fentanyl was 32 years (mean=33; range: 17–48). The most common reason detainees said they had started using fentanyl was that it had been prescribed for medical reasons, such as chronic pain (36%; n=10). Other main reasons were that fentanyl had been prescribed as a substitute for heroin (29%; n=8) or was used for its (unspecified) positive effects (29%; n=8).

## Non-medical use of fentanyl

A 2016 study investigated non-medical fentanyl use in the detainee population (Sullivan, Ticehurst & Bricknell 2018). Of all detainees in the 2016 study who reported having used fentanyl in the last 12 months, 85 percent (n=11) were classified as non-medical users. Over half of these non-medical users reported fentanyl use every six to 12 months (55%; n=6), 27 percent (n=3) reported monthly use and 18 percent (n=2) weekly use. Forty-six percent (n=6) of detainees who reported fentanyl use in 2016 had obtained it from a family member or friend without payment and 38 percent (n=5) bought it from a street dealer.

In 2018, only seven detainees who reported having used fentanyl as their most frequently used opioid in the last 12 months were asked about their non-medical use—this was 25 percent of detainees who reported having used fentanyl in the last 12 months. This filtering was a result of the questionnaire design, which focused on the drugs most frequently used in the last 12 months. Of these seven detainees, five had engaged in non-medical use of fentanyl. Four of the five non-medical users consumed fentanyl less than monthly to once or twice a year. Four of the five non-medical users obtained fentanyl from family or friends without paying for it. One detainee said they had bought fentanyl from a family member or friend, and one said they had obtained it from a dealer.

## Polydrug use

The seven detainees who reported in 2018 that fentanyl was the opioid they most frequently used were also asked whether they consumed fentanyl with any other substance. No users reported using fentanyl with another prescription opioid, but five users reported that they had used fentanyl with other substances. Of these five detainees, three reported having used fentanyl with tobacco, one reported having used it with cannabis and alcohol, and another reported having used it with methamphetamine and tobacco.

## References

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