Drug use and harm in rural Australia: Establishing a Rural Drug Monitoring System

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Funding to attend NRHC 2015 from University Centre for Rural Health (North Coast) and School of Public Health, University of Sydney
Methamphetamine use on rise: Rural and regional centres struggle to cope

Townswamped by ice epidemic

Rachel Olding

An unprecedented spread of the drug ice in regional and rural NSW is reaching critical levels, experts say, but efforts to tackle the problem are being crippled by an absence of services.

Amphetamine use, particularly crystal methamphetamine or “ice”, has risen by up to 180 per cent over two years in some regional centres such as Coffs Harbour, Cessnock and Wagga Wagga.

But the scourge is also infiltrating smaller towns such as Moree, Broken Hill and Casino – that had never heard of the drug 10 years ago.

Syringes have become such a common sight in Moree, population 10,000, that the debate has turned to the merits of a legal injecting centre. Researchers say it would become the first rural town in the world to have one.

Council workers were collecting 300 syringes from parks each month before yellow disposal bins were installed around Moree recently.

Local elder Pauline Briggs, who helped to establish the now disused Roy Thorne House Substance Misuse Rehabilitation Centre, said she picks up three or four needles outside her house every day.

“Ice is like the evil clown and it’s just taken a grip on Moree,” Ms Briggs’ granddaughter, Nari Kay, said.

Brunswick Briggs, harm minimisation project officer for the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council, said towns like Moree despair at curbing the ice scourge.

“We’re probably in the critical stages and we’re just trying to get an understanding of what our understanding is,” she said. “In places like Moree, where they’ve seen the Roy Thorne centre close down, I don’t think they know what to do.”

Arrests for amphetamine possession outside Sydney have increased by more than double the rate of Sydney, data provided to Fairfax Media reveals.

Posseion offences grew by 11 per cent in greater Sydney in the past two years and by almost 25 per cent for the rest of NSW. And arrest data is the tip of the iceberg, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research director Don Weatherburn said.

“At this early stage of the epidemic, there wouldn’t be large numbers going to emergency departments or coming to the attention of police because most people seem to be recreational users that aren’t in serious trouble yet,” he said.

This year, police have undertaken large-scale operations to bust supply rings in Casino, the Shoalhaven, Armidale, Broken Hill and Wagga. But the services available to help ice users are still ill.

Rebecca McKethan, a fellow at the Centre for Research on Ageing, Health and Wellbeing, said:

“On small towns you might have 10 beds [for rehabilitation], so if there is a sudden expansion it’s very difficult to deal with,” she said.

The number of drug labs in NSW has doubled in five years and increasingly they are being discovered in regional towns. Organised crime syndicates from the city are also expanding their reach. Imports of amphetamines seized at the border increased by 85 per cent between 2011-12 and 2012-13.

On Wednesday, a Northmead man was picked up on the Sturt Highway bound for Wagga Wagga with a kilogram of amphetamines in the boot of his BMW.

The Australian Crime Commission said the resurgence of methamphetamine is their “highest priority” because it poses the “highest risk to the Australian community of all illicit drug and organised crime markets”.

Acting chief executive Paul Jevtic said it is emerging as “a pandemic akin to the issue of crack cocaine in the US” due to its relative accessibility, affordability and destructive side effects.

NSW Drug Squad commander Tony Cooke said the squad was finding more labs “but there is still much work that needs to be done”.

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Nari Kay
Drug use and markets

› Patterns of drug use
  - Methamphetamine (including ‘ice’)
  - Pharmaceutical drugs

› Drug markets
  - Methamphetamine versus heroin
  - Pharmaceutical drugs
Risk behaviours and treatment utilisation

› Injecting risk behaviours
  - Access/confidentiality issues
  - High levels of sharing

› Treatment utilisation
  - Methamphetamine treatment presentations
  - Complex clinical needs
  - Barriers including access/confidentiality issues
What is needed?

Drug use patterns and related issues facing rural communities

- accurate and timely information
- changes over time
- heterogeneity of rural Australia
Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS)
Ecstasy and related Drug Reporting System (EDRS)

Collect annual data on trends in illicit drug use capital cities

- IDRS – heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis
- EDRS – ‘party drugs’ (ecstasy, ketamine and GHB)
Triangulation of data

Existing indicators of drug-related issues

Interviews with key informants

Survey of ‘sentinel’ populations of drug users

Survey of ‘sentinel’ populations of drug users
AUSTRALIAN
DRUG TRENDS
2013

FINDINGS FROM THE
ILLEGAL DRUG REPORTING SYSTEM

The IDRS Project is supported by funding from the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund
Rural Drug Monitoring System: Feasibility study (NNSWLHD)

- Illicit drug markets
- Patterns of use
- Harms
- Feasibility
Establishing a national Rural Drug Monitoring System

› Multiple data sources
› Multiple locations
  - Research expertise and local engagement

› Outcomes
  - Accurate and comprehensive information
  - Enable timely and appropriate responses
No evidence of ‘ice’ epidemic

› Not new people using
› Shift from speed to ice
› Methamphetamine purer and cheaper
› Ice use associated with more harms
› Users ageing (not necessarily young people)
› Clinical and policy implications
› All metro data – what’s happening in rural Australia?
Any questions or comments?
Thank you

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References


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