

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY



2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

2.1 Methamphetamines in Australia

Amphetamines have been a feature of drug use in Australia for a number of years, with concern about the levels of use among young people first raised in the mid to late 1980s. The 1990s brought significant changes in the nature of amphetamine use in Australia, and has resulted in larger numbers of people becoming regular or occasional users.

Firstly, there was a change in the manufacture and supply of amphetamine to the more potent chemical derivative of methamphetamine, which now accounts for over 90% of all amphetamines seized in Australia¹. Compounding this was the introduction of crystalline methamphetamine (commonly known as ice or crystal meth) into the Australian market in the late 1990s. The introduction of ice has been strongly associated with increased harms among existing users of methamphetamines², and the take up of smoking methamphetamine among a broader group of 'recreational' drug users³. At the same time that crystalline methamphetamine emerged on the Australia drug market, domestically produced methamphetamines began to be marketed as high purity damp or oily powder called 'base'⁴.

All forms of methamphetamines can be used administered using a variety of methods, the most common of which include snorting, swallowing, smoking through to injecting. Methamphetamines are usually sold in the quantity of a 'point', which is approximately 0.1 grams of 'base' or 'ice', or half-to-one gram of the low purity powdered 'speed'⁵

These changes in manufacture and supply have resulted in methamphetamines being the second most commonly used illicit drugs used in Australia today, with almost one in ten Australians (9.1%) having ever tried methamphetamines. To some extent, these statistics disguise the prevalence of methamphetamine use among younger Australian. The 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey⁶ found that one in five (21.1%) Australians aged 20-29 years claimed to have methamphetamines in their lifetime. Some 10.7% reported doing so within the past 12 months⁷.

¹ McKetin, R., 2007, in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007.

² Topp, et al, 2002 cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

³ McKetin, R., et al, 2005, cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

⁴ McKetin, R., 2007, in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

⁵ McKetin, R., 2007, in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005, cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

⁷ All figures quoted are drawn from McKetin, R., 2007, in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007.



According to the National Drug Strategy Household Surveys, undertaken every three years, the lifetime and current prevalence of methamphetamine use has not changed significantly since large increases were first reported in the mid to late 1990s⁸. However, data sourced from Australian Crime Commission's Illicit Drug Data Report from 2000 to 2006 indicate increases in methamphetamine related arrests from approximately 8,000 in 1999 to almost 10,000 in 2004. Similarly, hospital admissions due to the use of stimulants (other than cocaine) increased from approximately 7,000 to just under 10,000 in the same period⁹.

2.2 Background to this Research

These increasing rates of methamphetamine related problems, and increases in use of other psychostimulants in Australia, highlighted the need to develop coordinated, complementary and innovative interventions focused on the use of these drugs. To this end, the Australian Government allocated over \$15 million to the National Psychostimulants Initiative from 2003-4 to 2009-10. Measures taken under the initiative aim to address prevention, treatment, harm and supply reduction of psychostimulants, including methamphetamine.

One of the difficulties facing the National Psychostimulants Initiative is that it is difficult to define the typical characteristics of methamphetamine users given the significant number of people (estimated at around 1.5 million¹⁰) who have tried the drugs. Regular users, those that use the drug at least monthly, can vary from highly functional young 'new' users and 'recreational' users from a range of demographic backgrounds, through to chronic dependent users who are more likely to be injecting drug users, possibly from low socio economic backgrounds and with a range of comorbid mental and physical health problems¹¹.

A number of surveys of methamphetamine users have identified that the majority are young adults who are socially networked with other users of the drug¹². These studies also identify that regular users are often dependent on government allowances or, if they are employed, are in a variety of non-skilled and semi-skilled occupations. One of these studies highlights that while highly educated people in high-level management and professional occupations may use methamphetamines, they are usually under-represented in surveys due to the way in which they are conducted¹³.

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1999, 2002, 2005, cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

⁹ McKetin, R., 2007 in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

¹⁰ Australian Crime Commission, 2000-2006, cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

¹¹ McKetin, R., 2007, in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

¹² Lynch *et al.*, 2003, McKetin *et al.*, 2005, cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

¹³ McKetin *et al.*, 2005, cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007

The Department of Health and Ageing, in consultation with the Expert Reference Group (ERG) that has been engaged to advise the Department National Psychostimulants Initiative, identified a number of sub-groups of methamphetamine users that it is believed would benefit from targeted approaches to information, treatment and other interventions. These groups (the 'target audiences') include, but are not limited, to:

- the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community (GLBT);
- regular rave / dance party attendees;
- Indigenous people;
- those living in rural and regional areas;
- workers in particular industries, eg long-haul truck drivers, construction, hospitality
- young people aged 16-24 years;
- university students; and
- general users, including occasional/recreational users (people aged 25+ years)



3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this research was to assist in the development of targeted interventions, resources and support by identifying patterns of use and harms associated with methamphetamine use among specific groups in Australia.

To achieve this, the research sought to conduct a full exploration of the different target audiences':

- patterns of use, including social contexts and drug use practices;
- motivations for use;
- knowledge of risks and harms associated with use including the perceived severity of risks;
- awareness, attitudes and behaviour with regards to harm reduction practices;
- awareness of and attitudes toward treatment and support services including Needle and Syringe Programs, peer education and so on;
- behaviour with regard to treatment and support options; and
- barriers and motivators to seeking treatment.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Overview

The research involved a two stage qualitative methodology. The initial stage involved research among stakeholders and service providers and consisted of 2 group discussions and 16 in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face or by telephone. A second stage of research among methamphetamine users from the target audiences followed. This comprised 34 small group discussions and 18 face-to-face or telephone interviews. Twelve of these interviews were with Indigenous Australians. Each small group discussion comprised between 4-7 respondents and was of approximately 1½ hours duration.

4.2 Stage 1: Research with Stakeholders and Service Providers

The research objectives outlined above were consistent across both stages. In addition, the initial research among stakeholders and service providers sought to:

- gain stakeholder feedback on the broad approach to discussions and methodology with the target audiences;
- apply any learnings that stakeholders and service providers may have in dealing with methamphetamine users; and
- gain feedback on the proposed sample structure.

The final sample of stakeholders and service providers is described in the table below.

Table 1: Final sample of stakeholder and service providers

GROUP / DEPTH	ORGANISATION	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	LOCATION	STATE
Group 1	Service providers, needle and syringe program managers and pharmacists	6-8	Sydney	NSW
Group 2		6-8	Melbourne	VIC
Depth 1	Alcohol & Other Drugs Council of Australia	1	Canberra*	ACT
Depth 2	Australian Users Leagues	4	Canberra	ACT
Depth 3		1	Perth*	WA
Depth 4		1	Sydney	NSW
Depth 5	State based AIDS Councils	1	Perth*	WA
Depth 6		1	Brisbane*	QLD
Depth 7		1	Hobart*	TAS
Depth 8	State & Territory AIDS and Hepatitis Councils	1	Darwin*	NT
Depth 9		1	Cairns*	QLD
Depth 10	Rural and Regional AOD Treatment Centres	1	Hope Forest*	SA
Depth 11		1	Armadale*	WA
Depth 12		1	Orange*	NSW
Depth 13		1	Metro and Regional	NSW, SA, WA
Depth 14	1			
Depth 15	1			
Depth 16				

* Interviews conducted by phone



As main findings from the stakeholder research were later validated through group discussions with target audiences, these have not been reported on separately. However, stakeholders made a number of recommendations in regard to the structure of the sample among target audiences, including:

- having injectors and non-injectors in different groups;
- recruiting on the basis of concern levels about use of ice;
- incorporating sex workers in the sample; and
- incorporating high end professionals in the sample, for example people working in financial services and banking.

As a result of the stakeholder research, all groups were subsequently recruited on levels of concern over use of ice. Sex workers were included in the sample either as specific in-depth interviews or as respondents in the group discussions. Recruitment of high end professionals was attempted, however this proved difficult due to potential respondents' concerns for their anonymity¹⁴. As such, the resulting discussion groups targeting professionals consisted of respondents on medium to high incomes. Due to the range of variables used in the discussion group segmentation, it also proved to be a difficult task in recruitment to have completely separate groups of injectors and non-injectors. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 discuss recruitment Issues encountered throughout recruitment more detail.

4.3 Stage 2: Research with Target Audiences

The proposed sample comprised 36 small group discussions consisting of 4-6 respondents among the target audiences, and 12 individual or paired depth interviews with users among the Indigenous population conducted by the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre of Australia (CIRCA). The sample proposed was segmented according to target audience, frequency of methamphetamine use, gender, and state. The final sample included 34 small group discussions and 18 in-depth interviews with a similar distribution across groups of target audiences, frequency of use, gender and state as that proposed.

The table below illustrates the differences in these variables between the proposed sample and that achieved.

¹⁴ Given the difficulties in targeting this group in this study and in the methodology used in other community surveys (McKetin, R. *et al*, 2005 cited in *Illicit Drug Use in Australia: Epidemiology, use patterns and associated harm*, (2nd edition), Ross, J., (ed), National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, 2007), some consideration should be given to other methods of encouraging participation should further research among this audience be undertaken.

Table 2: Differences between Proposed and Final Samples

TARGET AUDIENCE			STATE/ TERRITORY		
	PROPOSED	ACHIEVED		PROPOSED	ACHIEVED
Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender	4	4	NSW	9	8 + 4 depths
Regular rave / dance party attendees	4	3	SA	6	6
Mix rave party attendees / young people / uni students	3	3	WA	8	8 + 1 depth
Workers in particular industry	9	7 + 1 depth	VIC	9	8
Young people aged 16-24	4	4	NT	4	0
University students	3	4	QLD	0	4
General (including occasional / regular) and those over 25 yrs	5	6			
Rural / regional	4	3 + 4 depths			
Professionals	0	3			
Sex Workers	0	1 depth			
Indigenous	12 depths	12 depths			
FREQUENCY OF USE**			GENDER#		
	PROPOSED	ACHIEVED		PROPOSED	ACHIEVED
Heavy - several times a month	13	13 + 2 depths	Males	15	12 + 3 depths
Regular - at least once a month	10	10 + 2 depths	Females	12	10 + 3 depths
Occasional - less than once a month	9	10 + 2 depths	Mix males/ females	9	12
Stopped using – not within the last 3 months	4	1			

Tables 3 and 4 (below) show the final sample.

Table 3: Final group sample of methamphetamine users

GRP	TARGET AUDIENCE	USAGE	CONCERN	GENDER	LOCATION	STATE
1	Gay, under 30's	Heavy	Not concerned	M	Metro	NSW
2	Rave party attendees	Regular	Not concerned	M	Metro	NSW
3	High-end professionals	Occasional	Mix	M	Metro	NSW
4	Construction	Regular	Mix	M	Metro	NSW
5	Hospitality	Heavy	Occasional	F	Metro	NSW
6	Young	Occasional	Concerned	F	Metro	NSW
7	Uni students, 18-21	Regular	Not concerned	Mix	Metro	NSW
8	General	Occasional	Mix	Mix	Metro	NSW
9	Gay	Heavy	Not concerned	F	Metro	SA
10	General	Heavy	Not concerned	M	Metro	SA
11	Truckies, construction, hospitality (older)	Regular	Not concerned	M	Metro	SA
12	Professionals	Regular / Occasional	Mix	F	Metro	SA
13	Young, Uni students, Rave party attendees	Regular	Not concerned	Mix	Metro	SA
14	General (incl. sex workers)	Heavy	Not concerned	F	Metro	SA
15	Gay	Regular	Mix	F	Metro	VIC
16	Rave party attendees	Occasional	Not concerned	Mix	Metro	VIC
17	Rural / regional	Occasional / Heavy	Not concerned	Mix	Regional	VIC
18	Rural / regional	Occasional / Heavy	Mix	Mix	Regional	VIC
19	General	Not any more	Not concerned	M	Metro	VIC
20	Young	Regular	Not concerned	M	Metro	VIC
21	Uni students	Heavy	Mix	M	Metro	VIC
22	General	Heavy	Mix	F	Metro	VIC
23	Hospitality	Regular	Mix	Mix	Metro	WA
24	Professionals	Occasional	Mix	Mix	Metro	WA
25	Drivers / construction / labour	Heavy	Mix	M (one F)	Metro	WA
26	Young	Occasional	Concerned	Mix	Metro	WA
27	General	Heavy	Not concerned	F	Metro	WA
28	Young, Uni students, Rave party attendees	Occasional / Heavy	Concerned	Mix	Metro	WA
29	University / TAFE students	Occasional	Not concerned	F	Metro	WA
30	Gay	Regular / heavy	Concerned	M	Metro	WA
31	Construction / labour / hospitality	Occasional	Mix	Mix	Regional	QLD
32	Young, Uni students, Rave party attendees	Occasional	Concern	F	Regional	QLD
33	General	Regular	Not concerned	M	Metro	QLD
34	Rave party attendees	Heavy	Not concerned	Mix	Metro	QLD



Table 4: Final in-depth interview sample of methamphetamine users

ID	TARGET AUDIENCE	USAGE	CONCERN	GENDER	STATE
1	Rural / Regional	Heavy	Not concerned	M	NSW
2	Rural / Regional	Heavy	Not concerned	M	NSW
3	Rural / Regional	Occasional	Concerned	F	NSW
4	Rural / Regional	Not any more	Concerned	F	NSW
5	Taxi driver	Regular / Heavy	Not concerned	M	WA
6	Sex worker	Regular / Heavy	Concerned	F	QLD
ID	TARGET AUDIENCE	USAGE	AGE	GENDER	LOCATION
7	Indigenous	Regular / Heavy	18-27	M	Illawarra, NSW
8				M	
9				M	
10				M	
11				F	
12				F	
13			32-36	M	Western Sydney, NSW
14				M	
15				F	
16			28-34	M	Inner Sydney, NSW
17				M	
18				F	

4.4 Recruitment

The primary recruitment strategy used was to identify potential respondents through accredited recruitment specialists and then to use the technique of ‘snowballing’. This involves recruiters identifying people who may know other people who fit the profiles of the target groups. Once identified, the nature of the study is explained and they in turn are asked to approach others who fit the profiles of the people required in the sample. Blue Moon has used this technique successfully in the past on a number of projects involving users of illicit drugs.

Another method used by some recruiters was to contact organisations that offer support and assistance for drug users. This method is useful for reaching groups such as intravenous drug users. However, it does have the limitation of only targeting those who have already sought some assistance or support for their drug use. Despite these strategies, a number of difficulties were encountered during recruitment. These in turn resulted in the changes (described above) that were made to the proposed sample.

The first difficulty was recruiter reluctance. In contrast to previous research undertaken with users of illicit drugs, many recruiters were unwilling to approach people on the topic of methamphetamines, particularly when the example of ice was given as a potential drug that could be used. This reluctance was based on:

- a perception by many that all methamphetamine users are ‘junkies’;

- an unwillingness to ask people on their database due to anticipated negative reactions; and
- general fear of encountering people who use methamphetamines, particularly by those that held the groups in their offices.

The second difficulty encountered through recruitment was a greater reluctance by respondents to admit to their use of methamphetamines, particularly ice, than that previously experienced with research among users of other drugs. Many tended to fear loss of anonymity by attending groups and this made the use of snowballing difficult. This fear was exacerbated among the target groups where the social network was smaller and there was greater potential of respondents encountering someone they already knew or may meet in the future. This was also the primary driver of changing the location of the proposed Northern Territory groups to Queensland.

Recruitment in Indigenous communities was just as difficult. In previous research among users of illicit drugs, CIRCA had successfully recruited respondents through rehabilitation centres, Aboriginal Medical Services, youth workers, Indigenous researchers and their network of community organisations. These recruitment channels did not prove effective for users of methamphetamines, with a number of barriers identified.

Firstly, there was little awareness with Indigenous researchers and community organisations of methamphetamine use. Secondly, recruitment through Aboriginal Medical Services was not possible due to:

- concerns of anonymity;
- the need for ethics approval by some services; and
- indications from stakeholders that Indigenous users of methamphetamines were likely to be accessing mainstream services rather than Indigenous services due to the stigma associated with methamphetamine, specifically ice, use in their communities.

All research among Indigenous users was undertaken in urban areas, as opposed to also incorporating respondents from rural and regional areas. The sample was changed as research among stakeholders indicated uncertainty about the prevalence of methamphetamine use in regional, rural and remote locations. Stakeholder perceptions of use outside of urban areas tended to be anecdotal and were unable to be substantiated when organisations were contacted to assist in recruitment.

4.5 Learnings from Recruitment

In contrast to previous research among users of illicit drugs, the reaction of recruiters illustrated a greater stigma held among the general public towards ice users, which also extends to users of other methamphetamines. Later group discussions indicated that methamphetamine users recognise this public perception, resulting in a reluctance to discuss use of the drugs with those outside the 'social' using circle. There was also some indication

during recruitment that the use of snowballing was made more difficult by the fact that heavier users tend to disguise the extent of their use even from those within their 'social' circle.

4.6 Discussion Areas

Semi-structured discussion guides were developed for use in both stages of the research to ensure that all the issues were covered in every interview. The use of semi-structured guides allows the respondents themselves to dictate the flow of discussions with guidance from the moderator, rather than the questions being administered in the question/response format common in quantitative research.

A separate but similar guide was prepared for the Indigenous target group. All discussion guides are appended (Appendix A). Each guide was approved by members of the Department prior to use.

4.7 Research Timing

The initial research stage among stakeholders and service providers occurred between 10-21 September, 2007. The majority of fieldwork among the target audiences was conducted between 2-23 October, 2007. The fieldwork concluded with a small number of Indigenous interviews on 5 November, 2007.