

Australia sets up task force to tackle 'dreadful' ice epidemic (Update)

April 7 2015

Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Wednesday launched a national task force to fight the scourge of crystal methamphetamine, or ice, which he said was causing "absolute devastation" in Australia.

"We will take every possible step to combat this dreadful, dreadful scourge," Abbott told reporters.

"It destroys lives, it ravages families, it damages communities, it is on the increase."

Out of a population of 23 million Australians, some 400,000 took methamphetamine in any one year, he said, noting that half of those used the highly-addictive white crystalline version commonly known as ice with 100,000 taking it on a weekly basis.

"I am appalled at what is happening on our streets and in our homes," Abbott said.

"The propensity for violence, the propensity to subsequent very serious mental illness, the propensity to disfigurement which ice produces means that this is a drug epidemic way beyond anything that we have seen before."

Justice Minister Michael Keenan and assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash will oversee the task force, which will be headed by former Victorian police commissioner Ken Lay.

The force will "identify ways to take a systematic, comprehensive and coordinated approach to education, health and law enforcement" and develop a national ice action strategy, a statement said.

In New South Wales, police report a 25 per cent jump in ice-related arrests and seizures of the drug by customs or law enforcement over the last two years, the prime minister said.

Keenan said that, in addition to the law enforcement response, "we also need to find other ways to work with the community, particularly within the health sector to address this issue".

The government's Australian Crime Commission last month branded ice the "greatest drug threat" to Australians and said local and international crime groups were heavily involved.

Ice use rates almost doubled in the last twelve months, it said.

Australia was a particularly attractive market for drug traffickers, with US\$80 buying one gram of ice in China while users in Australia pay US\$500 a gram.

Global production and trafficking of methamphetamine is growing amid increasing demand in east and south-east Asia, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime said last year.

It added that record levels of methamphetamine were also being seized across the world.

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