

Increasing use of internet to buy and sell drugs

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Findings from the latest Illicit Drug Monitoring System (IDMS) study show 72 per cent of frequent drug users report increased buying and selling drugs via social media and encrypted websites.

The IDMS study, conducted by Massey University researchers, provides an annual snapshot of trends in [illegal drug](#) use and drug markets in New Zealand. More than 300 frequent illegal drug users from Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch were interviewed about drug trends between August and December 2014.

Dr Chris Wilkins, senior researcher and leader of the illegal drug research team at the SHORE and Whāriki Research Centre, says social media, and in particular the use of encrypted websites, offers a new platform to promote drug use and connect drug sellers with drug users.

The proportion of frequent drug users who mentioned encrypted websites as a new way of selling drugs has markedly increased from virtually none in 2011 to 37 per cent of surveyed users just three years later. Websites, like Nucleus and Alphabay, take this to a new level by offering enhanced anonymity via encryption and access to international drug markets selling a range of drug types not widely available in New Zealand, Dr Wilkins says. "These technological advances present new challenges to domestic and international drug control."

A decline in the use and availability of synthetic cannabinoids following ban

The commercial legal market for so-called "legal highs" ended in May 2014 following reports of adverse effects from products and social disruption around retail outlets. Findings from the IDMS study indicate the bans had a significant impact on the use and availability of synthetic cannabinoids, the most widely used products.

The use of synthetic cannabinoids by ecstasy users declined sharply, from 22 per cent in 2013 to six per cent in 2014. The proportion of frequent drug users who reported that synthetic cannabinoids were more difficult to obtain leapt from 19 per cent to 57 per cent in 2014. Those who reported the price was increasing rose from 31 per cent in 2013 to 51 per cent in a year later, and drug users who said fewer people were using synthetic cannabinoids increased from 36 per cent in 2013 to 70 per cent.

Dr Wilkins says, "The findings suggest while synthetic cannabinoids have not disappeared completely, their use and availability is much reduced with the end of the legal commercial market."

The surge in methamphetamine supply continues

Increased availability of [methamphetamine](#) continued in 2014, particularly in Christchurch and Auckland, Dr Wilkins says. "The proportion of frequent drug users who could purchase methamphetamine in one hour or less increased from 51 per cent in 2011 to 76 per cent in 2014."

The 106 kilograms of methamphetamine stopped at the border by authorities in 2014 was the highest quantity seized in New Zealand since 2006 with Dr Wilkins noting gangs play a leading role in this supply. "The proportion of frequent drug users who purchased methamphetamine from a gang member increased from 36 per cent in 2013 to 50 per cent."

A range of factors may be behind the increased methamphetamine availability Dr Wilkins says. "This can be put down to a number of things - general recovery following the earthquakes, the influx of workers for the rebuild and reported re-organisation of the gang scene resulting in greater supply of methamphetamine. There are also reports of greater methamphetamine supply in Australia and a more globally connected methamphetamine supply network.

Some evidence of a "cannabis drought"

Recent claims of a "cannabis drought" in New Zealand are supported by the study too, Dr Wilkins says. The current availability of cannabis fell from 2013 to 2014, with a particularly marked decrease in Christchurch. The proportion who described the current availability of cannabis as "very easy" declined from 62 per cent in 2013 to 45 per cent in 2014. The frequent [drug users](#) also reported modest declines in cannabis use in recent years.

"A number of factors may be responsible for the decline in cannabis availability including the emergence of synthetic cannabinoids making cannabis cultivation less attractive to criminal groups," Dr Wilkins says.

More information: The IDMS 2014 final report is available for download:

www.shore.ac.nz/massey/fms/Colleges/College%20of%20Humanities%20and%20Social%20Sciences/Shore/reports/IDMS%202014%20Final%20Report.pdf?38B9C25FBFC4F517CCB03BCA4C7CF64A

Provided by Massey University

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