

# **Recent Trends in Illegal Drug Use in New Zealand, 2006-2008: Findings from the 2006, 2007 and 2008 Illicit Drug Monitoring System (IDMS)**

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## **Executive Summary**

The Illicit Drug Monitoring System (IDMS) is conducted annually to provide a 'snapshot' of trends in illegal drug use and drug related harm in New Zealand. The study is intended to inform strategic responses to drug problems in New Zealand. In 2008, we interviewed 404 frequent drug users (i.e. 137 frequent methamphetamine users, 132 frequent injecting drug users and 135 frequent ecstasy users) in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch about recent trends in drug use and drug related harm.

### ***Methamphetamine ('P')***

There is continuing evidence of a levelling out in methamphetamine use. The frequent drug users reported less people they know were using methamphetamine in 2008 compared to 2007 and the availability of methamphetamine was considered to be more difficult in 2008 compared to 2007. The price of a gram of methamphetamine was higher in 2008 compared to 2006 (\$698 vs. \$610). Data from a number of secondary sources were also consistent with this appreciation of the situation. The number of methamphetamine laboratories detected by New Zealand Police declined from 190 labs in 2007 to 133 labs in 2008 (-30%). The number of calls to the Drug and Alcohol Helpline for methamphetamine related problems fell from 1,941 calls in 2005/06 to 1,206 calls in 2007/08 (-38%). The number of positive screens for problematic amphetamine use identified by the CADS drug treatment service declined from 226 in 2006 to 150 in 2008 (-34%). The New Zealand National Household Drug Survey found the use of amphetamine in the past year in the general population (aged 15-45 years) had not changed in 2006 compared to 2003 (i.e. from 4.0% in 2003 to 3.4% in 2006). The use of methamphetamine in the general population (14 years +) in Australia has also declined in recent years from 3.4% in 2001 to 2.3% in 2007. The dramatic increase in seizures of methamphetamine precursors at the New Zealand border may represent a restructuring of the supply of precursors from intermittent diversion from local pharmacies to high volume importation of high potency precursors from overseas. If this is the case the increase in

seizures of precursors at the border may not represent an increase in total domestic production of methamphetamine. The decline in the number of detections of methamphetamine laboratories may indicate a movement towards larger and more professionally concealed methamphetamine laboratories.

### ***Ecstasy (MDMA)***

The use of ecstasy appears to be increasing. The frequent drug users thought more people they know were using ecstasy in 2007 compared to 2006. The availability of ecstasy was considered to be easier in 2008 compared to 2006. The mean price of a pill of ecstasy fell in 2008 compared to 2006 (\$55 vs. \$59). New Zealand National Household Drug Survey data indicate a steady rise in the use of ecstasy in the general population since 1998 (from 1.5% in 1998 to 3.9% in 2006). Similarly in Australia the use of ecstasy in the general population (aged 14 years+) increased from 2.9% in 2001 to 3.5% in 2007. It remains unclear the extent to which the 'ecstasy' sold in New Zealand contains substances other than MDMA, such as benzylpiperazine (BZP) or ketamine. It is possible that surplus stocks of BZP pills are currently being sold as ecstasy.

### ***Cannabis***

Cannabis continues to be widely used. The frequent drug users considered cannabis to be easier to obtain in 2008 compared to previous years. The frequent drug users also thought more people they know were using cannabis in 2008 compared to 2006. New Zealand National Household Drug Survey data suggests the use of cannabis in the general population has declined in recent years (from 20.4% in 2003 to 17.9% in 2006). Similar declines in cannabis use have also been found in Australia and the United Kingdom. The decline in cannabis use among young people in the general population may reflect a growing awareness of the health risks of smoking and a preference for new stimulant drugs such as amphetamine and ecstasy.

### ***LSD***

LSD has been in decline in the general population during the past decade or so (from 3.9% in 1998 to 1.8% in 2006). However, it remains popular among ecstasy users in the dance party scene. LSD was considered to be more available in 2008 compared to 2006, but there was no statistically significant change in the number of users.

### ***Opioids***

Street morphine, followed closely by street methadone, were the most widely available and used opioids. There was no change in the availability, price and purity of these opioid drugs.

Street methadone was considered to be weaker than street morphine. More people were considered to be using street methadone. 'Homebake' heroin was considered to be difficult to obtain and becoming more difficult to obtain. Heroin was considered very difficult to obtain. The price of heroin was thought to be increasing and less people were using it.

### ***Cocaine***

Very few of the frequent drug users had any experience of cocaine. Cocaine was considered very difficult to obtain. However, the availability of cocaine was reported to have become easier in 2008 compared to 2007 and the purity of cocaine was considered higher in 2008 compared to 2006. The frequent drug users thought more people they know were using cocaine in 2008 compared to 2007 and there was some evidence that the frequent drug users themselves were using more cocaine. National Household Drug Survey data indicate there was a small increase in cocaine use in the general population in 2006 compared to 2003 (from 0.5% to 1.1%).

### ***Benzylpiperazine (BZP)***

The prohibition of BZP in April 2008 appears to have had a considerable negative impact on levels of availability and use of BZP. Lower proportions of the frequent drug users had used BZP in the past six months in 2008 compared to 2007. The frequent drug users also reported that less people they know were using BZP in 2008 compared to 2007. BZP was considered to be more difficult to obtain and the price of a gram of BZP was higher in 2008 compared to 2007 (\$51 vs. \$20). The supply of BZP was thought to be less reliable and it took longer to purchase in 2008 compared to 2007. Interestingly, the strength of BZP was believed to be higher in 2008 compared to 2007.

### ***Drug related harm***

The frequent drug users experienced a range of physical and psychological problems from their drug use. High proportions of frequent drug users reported harm to their energy and vitality, health, financial position, personal relationships and life opportunities. They also reported experiencing a range of drug related incidents including losing their tempers, arguing with others, doing things under the influence of drugs that they later regretted, having unprotected sex, having reduced work/study performance, getting into debt and having no money for food and rent. Eighty-four percent of the frequent injecting drug users and 63% of the frequent methamphetamine users were drug dependent.

### ***Reasons for using drugs, mental health and drug treatment***

High proportions of the frequent drug users reported using drugs to cope with everyday problems, depression and unhappiness, emotional problems, physical pain and because they were addicted. Fifty-five percent of the frequent injecting drug users and 41% of the frequent methamphetamine users had suffered from a mental illness. Thirty-four percent of the frequent injecting drug users and 22% of the frequent methamphetamine users had sought help for drug use in the past six months but not got it.

### ***Youth developmental problems and criminal behaviour***

High proportions of the frequent drug users reported that they had regularly ‘skipped’ school. Forty-five percent of the frequent methamphetamine users and 43% of the frequent injecting drug users had been suspended from school. Twenty-five percent of the frequent injecting drugs users and the same proportion of frequent methamphetamine users had committed a property crime in the past month. Thirty-two percent of the frequent methamphetamine users, 27% of the frequent ecstasy users and 32% of the frequent injecting drug users had sold drugs in the past month.

### ***Drug use and driving***

Ninety percent of the frequent methamphetamine users, 90% of the frequent injecting drug users and 62% of the frequent ecstasy users had driven under the influence of a drug other than alcohol in the past six months. Cannabis, methamphetamine, methadone, morphine and ecstasy were the drug types that the frequent drug users were most commonly under the influence of when driving. High proportions of the frequent drug users reported driving too fast, losing concentration, losing their temper at a another driver, driving through a Red Light and nearly hitting something while driving under the influence of a drug. Over half of the frequent drug users thought it was ‘unlikely’ or ‘very unlikely’ they would be identified as driving under the influence of a drug if stopped by police.

### ***Drug enforcement***

The frequent drug users had high levels of contact with police and the criminal justice system. Fifty percent of the frequent injecting drug users and 30% of the frequent methamphetamine users had been in prison. Forty percent of the frequent injecting drug users and 35% of the frequent methamphetamine users had been arrested in the past 12 months. The frequent methamphetamine users had been arrested a mean of three times in the past year and the frequent injecting drug users had been arrested a mean of two times in the past year.

### ***Economic aspects of frequent drug use***

The frequent injecting drug users spent a mean of \$270 per week on illegal drugs, the frequent methamphetamine users spent a mean of \$246 per week on illegal drugs, and the frequent ecstasy users spent a mean of \$67 per week on illegal drugs. The main ways the frequent injecting drug users used to pay for their drug use were social welfare benefits, paid employment, property crime, sex work and selling drugs. The main ways the frequent methamphetamine users used to pay for their drug use were paid employment, social welfare benefits, property crime and selling drugs. The main ways the frequent ecstasy users used to pay for their drug use were paid employment, student allowances/loans and social welfare payments.

