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## Key findings

### Overview of trends in drug use in the past six months

Drug type	Current availability	Change in availability	Change in number of users	Current price	Change in price
<b>Methamphetamine</b>	Easy/ very easy	Stable	Same/more	\$100 point	Stable/ fluctuating
<b>Crystal methamphetamine</b>	Easy	Stable/more difficult	Same/more	\$100 point	Stable
<b>Cannabis</b>	Very easy/ easy	Stable	Same	\$20 foil	Stable
<b>LSD</b>	Easy/ difficult	Stable/ fluctuating	Same	\$35 tab	Stable
<b>Ecstasy (MDMA)</b>	Easy	Stable	Same/more	\$60 pill	Stable/ decreasing
<b>Opiates</b>	Easy/ very easy	Stable	Same/more	\$100 per 100 milligrams	Stable

- Methamphetamine is currently easy to obtain but availability has remained stable in the past six months. There is some evidence of increasing use and declining prices over the past six months.
- Crystal methamphetamine is currently fairly easy to obtain but availability has become more difficult in the past six months. There is some evidence of increasing use. Prices have remained stable over the past six months.
- Cannabis is currently very easy to obtain and availability has remained stable in the past six months. Number of users and prices have remained stable.
- LSD is currently fairly difficult to obtain and availability has fluctuated over the past six months. Number of users has declined slightly. Prices have remained stable.
- Ecstasy (MDMA) is currently fairly easy to obtain and availability has fluctuated in the past six months. More people are reported to be using ecstasy (MDMA). Prices are reported to be decreasing.
- Opiates are currently easy to obtain but availability has remained stable in the past six months. There is some evidence of increasing use. Prices have been stable.

## Recent trends in drug use in New Zealand: key findings from the 2006 Illicit Drug Monitoring System (IDMS)

### Introduction

The Illicit Drug Monitoring System (IDMS) was established in 2005 to provide ongoing and timely information on changes in drug use and drug related harm in New Zealand. It is planned that the IDMS will be conducted annually on an ongoing basis.

This research briefing summarises recent trends in illegal drug use in New Zealand from the 2006 IDMS. Further research briefings from the 2006 IDMS are planned in the coming months and will focus on topics such as drug related harm, methamphetamine, regional drug trends, and intravenous drug use and related health issues.

Detailed findings from the 2006 IDMS can be found in the main project report which can be downloaded from the National Drug Policy website ([www.ndp.govt.nz](http://www.ndp.govt.nz)) or from the SHORE website ([www.shore.ac.nz](http://www.shore.ac.nz)). Copies of the 2006 main report will also be sent to university and government libraries. Past research briefings and reports from the 2005 IDMS can be downloaded from the SHORE website.

### Method

A total of 318 frequent drug users were interviewed for the 2006 IDMS, including 114 frequent methamphetamine users, 111 frequent ecstasy (MDMA) users and 93 frequent injecting drug users. Study participants were recruited from the three main centres (i.e. Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch) using purposive sampling and 'snowballing' (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981, Watters and Biernacki, 1989). Interviewing took place from July to October 2006. The research protocols used in the IDMS have been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Subjects Ethics Committee. Interviews are strictly confidential and anonymous. No participant in the study can be identified at any later date.

### Analysis

The frequent drug users were asked to only answer questions on the drug types of which they had good knowledge. The number of frequent drug users answering a particular question can therefore vary depending on the extent of experience of a drug type. To provide an overall quantitative measure of the current trend for each drug type, we calculated the mean score for a question by enumerating the scale provided. Findings are presented for the combined sample of all the frequent drug users interviewed (i.e. frequent methamphetamine users, frequent ecstasy users and frequent injecting drug users). Differences between the mean scores for the three groups of frequent drug users were tested using one-way ANOVAs with Tukey-Kramer post-hoc adjustments. A qualitative summary of the current situation for each drug type is also provided.

## Current availability of different drug types

The frequent drug users were asked to report the current availability of different drug types using a four point scale (Table 1). The drug types which the largest proportion of frequent drug users considered to be 'very easy' to obtain at present were cannabis (60%), opiates (41%) and methamphetamine (38%). Half of the frequent drug users said ecstasy (54%) and crystal methamphetamine (48%) were 'easy' to obtain at the moment. Over one-third of the frequent drug users (38%) reported that LSD was 'difficult' to obtain at the moment.

The mean score for the current availability of methamphetamine for all the frequent drug users was 1.8 which indicates that overall the current availability of methamphetamine is 'easy/very easy'. The mean score for the current availability of ecstasy (MDMA) for all the frequent drug users was 2.1 which indicates that overall the current level of availability of ecstasy (MDMA) is 'easy'. The frequent ecstasy users considered ecstasy (MDMA) more easily available than the frequent injecting drug users (2.0 vs. 2.3,  $p=0.0217$ ). The mean score for the current availability of LSD for all the frequent drug users was 2.4 which indicates that overall the current level of availability of LSD is 'easy/difficult'.

**Table 1: Current availability of different drug types, 2006**

CURRENT AVAILABILITY	Crystal methamphetamine		Ecstasy (MDMA)			
	Methamphetamine	Cannabis	LSD	Opiates		
Number with knowledge	n=176	n=107	n=276	n=124	n=200	n=114
Very easy [1]	38%	24%	60%	8%	20%	41%
Easy [2]	44%	48%	36%	47%	54%	45%
Difficult [3]	16%	23%	4%	38%	27%	10%
Very difficult (%) [4]	1%	5%	0%	7%	0%	4%
Mean availability score (1 = very easy - 4 = very difficult)	1.8	2.1	1.4	2.4	2.1	1.8
Overall current status	Easy/very easy	Easy	Very easy/easy	Easy/difficult	Easy	Easy/very easy

## Change in the availability of different drug types

The frequent drug users were asked to describe how the availability of different drug types had changed in the six months prior to their interview (Table 2). The drug types which the greatest proportion of frequent drug users indicated had become 'easier' to obtain in the past six months were methamphetamine (20%) and ecstasy (MDMA) (19%) (Table 2). The drug type for which the greatest proportion of frequent drug users indicated that availability had become 'more difficult' in the past six months was crystal methamphetamine (29%). The availability of a number of drug types was said to have fluctuated in the past six months including LSD (31%) and ecstasy (23%).

The mean score for the change in the availability of methamphetamine for all the frequent drug users was 2.0 which indicates that overall the availability of methamphetamine was 'stable' over the past six months. The mean score for the change in availability of crystal methamphetamine for all the frequent drug users was 2.2 which indicates that overall the availability of crystal methamphetamine was 'stable/more difficult' over the past six months.

**Table 2: Change in availability of different drug types in the last six months, 2006**

CHANGE IN AVAILABILITY	Crystal methamphetamine		Ecstasy (MDMA)			
	Methamphetamine	Cannabis	LSD	Opiates		
Number with knowledge	n=175	n=106	n=274	n=119	n=194	n=114
Easier [1]	20%	10%	7%	16%	19%	10%
Stable [2]	53%	50%	69%	34%	45%	73%
Fluctuates [2]	9%	10%	15%	31%	23%	8%
More difficult [3]	19%	29%	9%	18%	13%	10%
Mean change in availability score (1 = easier - 3 = more difficult)	2.0	2.2	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.0
Overall current status	Stable	Stable/more difficult	Stable	Stable/fluctuating	Stable	Stable

## Perceptions of the change in the number of people using different drugs

The frequent drugs users were asked whether more, less or the same number of people they know were using different drug types compared to six months ago. The drug types which the greatest proportion of frequent drug users thought 'more' of the people they know were using were methamphetamine (43%), ecstasy (MDMA) (39%), crystal methamphetamine (38%) and opiates (34%) (Table 3).

The mean score for all the frequent drug users in regard to the change in the number of methamphetamine users was 2.2 indicating that overall the 'same/more' people were using methamphetamine. The frequent ecstasy users were more likely to say 'less' people they know were using methamphetamine than either the frequent methamphetamine users (1.6 vs. 2.3,  $p=0.0002$ ) or the frequent injecting drug users (1.6 vs. 2.3,  $p=0.0010$ ). The mean score for all the frequent drug users in regard to the change in the number of ecstasy (MDMA) users was 2.3 indicating that overall the 'same/more' people were using ecstasy (MDMA). The mean score for all the frequent drug users in regard to the change in the number of LSD users was 1.9 indicating that overall 'about the same' number of people were using LSD. The frequent ecstasy users were more likely to say that 'more' people they know were using LSD than either the frequent injecting drug users (2.2 vs. 1.7,  $p=0.0203$ ) or the frequent methamphetamine users (2.2 vs. 1.8,  $p=0.0067$ ). The mean score for all the frequent drug users in regard to the change in the number of opiate users was 2.1 indicating that overall 'about the same' number of people were using opiates. The frequent injecting drug users were more likely to say that 'more' people they know were using opiates than the frequent methamphetamine users (2.3 vs. 1.7,  $p<0.0001$ ).

**Table 3: Users' perceptions of the change in the number of people using different drugs in the last six months, 2006**

CHANGE IN NUMBER PEOPLE USING	Meth-amphetamine	Crystal meth-amphetamine	Cannabis	LSD	Ecstasy (MDMA)	Opiates
Number with knowledge	n=175	n=108	n=279	n=125	n=196	n=116
Less [1]	23%	25%	10%	27%	11%	19%
Same [2]	34%	37%	73%	51%	51%	46%
More [3]	43%	38%	17%	22%	39%	34%
Mean change in number of people using score (1 = less – 3 = more)	2.2	2.1	2.1	1.9	2.3	2.1
Overall current status	Same/more	Same/more	Same	Same	Same/more	Same/more

### Current prices for drugs

The frequent drug users were asked to report prices for common retail quantities of different drug types. Methamphetamine and crystal methamphetamine were both reported to cost \$100 for a 'point' (i.e. 0.1 of a gram) (Table 4). A single tab of LSD was reported to cost \$35 and a single pill of ecstasy (MDMA) was reported to cost \$60. The frequent ecstasy (MDMA) users paid a higher mean price for a point of crystal methamphetamine than either the frequent methamphetamine users (\$130 vs. \$95,  $p < 0.0001$ ) or the frequent injecting drug users (\$130 vs. \$98,  $p = 0.0003$ ). The frequent methamphetamine users paid a lower mean price for a pill of ecstasy than both the frequent ecstasy users (\$54 vs. \$60,  $p = 0.0177$ ) and the frequent injecting drug users (\$54 vs. \$64,  $p = 0.0103$ ). The injecting drug users paid a higher mean price for an ounce of cannabis than the frequent methamphetamine users (\$309 vs. \$291,  $p = 0.0446$ ). Frequent methamphetamine users reported a lower mean price paid for a tab of LSD than either the frequent ecstasy (MDMA) users (\$30 vs. \$36,  $p = 0.0044$ ) or the frequent injecting drug users (\$30 vs. \$44,  $p < 0.0001$ ). The frequent ecstasy (MDMA) users reported a lower price paid for a tab of LSD than the frequent injecting drug users (\$36 vs. \$44,  $p = 0.0048$ ).

**Table 4: Price paid for different drug types by frequent drug users, 2006**

CURRENT PRICE	Meth-amphetamine	Crystal meth-amphetamine	Cannabis	LSD	Ecstasy (MDMA)	Opiates
Number with knowledge	n=144	n=76	n=229	n=117	n=190	n=87
Median price (\$)	\$100 point	\$100 point	\$20 foil	\$35 tab	\$60 pill	\$100 for 100mg

### Change in prices for drugs

The frequent drug users were asked whether the price of different drug types had changed in the past six months (Table 5). The drug types for which the greatest proportion of frequent drug users indicated there had been a 'decrease' in price were ecstasy (MDMA) (22%) and methamphetamine (23%). The most stable prices were those for cannabis (74%), LSD (70%) and opiates (65%).

The mean score for the change in the price of methamphetamine for all the frequent drug users was 1.9 which indicates that overall the price was 'stable/fluctuating' over the previous six months. The mean score for the change in the price of ecstasy (MDMA) for all the frequent drug users was 1.8 which indicates that the price was 'stable/decreasing' over the previous six months. The mean score for the change in the price of cannabis for all the frequent drug users was 2.1 which indicates that overall the price of cannabis was 'stable' over the previous six months. The frequent injecting drug users were more likely to describe the price of cannabis as 'increasing' than the frequent methamphetamine users (2.2 vs. 2.0,  $p = 0.0114$ ).

**Table 5: Change in the price of different drug types in the last six months, 2006**

CHANGE IN PRICE	Meth-amphetamine	Crystal meth-amphetamine	Cannabis	LSD	Ecstasy (MDMA)	Opiates
Number with knowledge	n=155	n=98	n=269	n=117	n=187	n=106
Decreasing [1]	23%	11%	4%	10%	22%	19%
Stable [2]	48%	61%	74%	70%	58%	65%
Fluctuating [2]	12%	10%	10%	9%	12%	5%
Increasing [3]	17%	17%	11%	10%	7%	11%
Mean change in price score (1 = decreasing – 3 = increasing)	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.0	1.8	2.0
Overall current status	Stable/fluctuating	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable/decreasing	Stable

## Discussion

The findings presented in this research bulletin concerning recent trends in illegal drug use confirm some of the changes in drug use which have been occurring in New Zealand since the later 1990s (see Wilkins et al., 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006). They also provide timely insights into how these trends have developed in recent months.

Methamphetamine remains widely available although there has been no overall change in its level of availability in the past six months. The frequent drug users thought more people they know were using methamphetamine compared to the previous six months. There was some evidence that prices for methamphetamine were declining although most frequent drug users thought prices were stable.

There were some differences in perceptions between the three groups of frequent drug users in regard to the change in levels of methamphetamine use in the past six months. The frequent ecstasy (MDMA) users were more likely to say that 'less' of the people they know were using methamphetamine than the other two groups of frequent drug users. This may represent a decline in the reputation of methamphetamine among the more middle class ecstasy users and a wider shift in methamphetamine use toward lower socio-economic sections of the community. The frequent ecstasy (MDMA) users were more likely to say that 'more' of the people they know were using LSD. LSD is a more traditional hallucinogenic drug and unlike methamphetamine is not readily associated with addiction and violence. The increased use of LSD by ecstasy users is consistent with a desire to reduce the health and legal risks associated with methamphetamine use.

Crystal methamphetamine was considered to be both currently less available and becoming more difficult to obtain compared to methamphetamine. In New Zealand, the term crystal methamphetamine or 'ice' is often used to refer to imported methamphetamine whereas the more generic term 'P' refers to the locally made methamphetamine. In May 2006, the New Zealand Police and New Zealand Customs Service seized the largest ever single seizure of crystal methamphetamine and related precursor chemicals (i.e. 95 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine and 150 kilograms of pseudoephedrine). The findings reported here suggest these successful drug enforcement operations impacted negatively on the availability of crystal methamphetamine in New Zealand over the subsequent months.

Ecstasy (MDMA) was considered fairly easy to obtain, but more difficult to obtain than the locally made methamphetamine. Ecstasy (MDMA) must be smuggled into New Zealand across the international border from often far off source countries, such as China and the Netherlands. New Zealand's geographical isolation, small population and strong border control appears to place additional barriers on the supply and hence availability of ecstasy in New Zealand. However, ecstasy (MDMA) was the drug type which overall the frequent drug users thought 'more' people they know were using. In addition, the price of ecstasy (MDMA) was considered to be on the decline. This increased demand for ecstasy (MDMA) may again reflect concerns among drug users about the mental health and legal risks of methamphetamine use. Law enforcement seizures of ecstasy (MDMA) in New Zealand declined significantly in 2004 and 2005 compared to previous years. The New Zealand Customs Service has attributed the decline in ecstasy (MDMA) seizures to more elaborate smuggling techniques being used by international drug trafficking groups rather than a decline in the use of the drug.

Cannabis remains the staple illegal drug in New Zealand with all three groups of our frequent drug users having knowledge of its availability and price. LSD was reported to be fairly difficult to obtain. The decline in the availability of

LSD may reflect growing demand for ecstasy (MDMA) over the past five years and the higher returns available from trafficking in ecstasy rather than LSD. Ecstasy (MDMA) may be perceived by drug users as a superior substitute to LSD as it provides similar hallucinogenic effects while also providing the energy to dance and socialise for extended periods of time.

The frequent methamphetamine users were found to pay lower prices than the other two groups of frequent drug users for both ecstasy (MDMA) and LSD. This was somewhat surprising in the case of ecstasy (MDMA) as we would naturally expect the frequent ecstasy users to be receiving the best prices for ecstasy. The lower prices paid for ecstasy (MDMA) by frequent methamphetamine users may reflect a more extensive participation in illegal drug markets in New Zealand. The use of ecstasy (MDMA) and opiates is largely confined to particular drug sub-cultures, that is dance party goers and intravenous drug users respectively. Methamphetamine appears to have a broader consumer base (see Wilkins et al., 2005) which may translate into greater access to different illegal drug markets. Methamphetamine users may also be closer to the well developed cannabis black market which in turn provides them with ready access to the sale of other illegal drug types.

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- Ministry of Health
- National Drug Intelligence Bureau (NDIB)
- New Zealand Police
- New Zealand Customs Service
- Odyssey House

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