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Revisiting recruitment issues in Australia's remote Top End: Psychostimulant users, price and proposed changes

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KEY FINDINGS

In all jurisdictions, eligibility for EDRS participation is based on regular ecstasy use, that is, use on *at least* six occasions in the six months prior to interview. Further to this, eligible participants are required to have resided in the same jurisdiction for the past 12 months, with no significant periods of time out of the area. Adhering to these eligibility criteria has proven challenging for the Northern Territory, which has failed to attract a sample of meaningful size in past years.

- Darwin being the smallest capital city in Australia.
- The remote geographical location away from the major drug markets of Sydney and Melbourne.
- A large proportion of transient young people, 'backpackers' and other young tourists, and defence personnel.
- Seasonal differences between monsoonal Darwin and other, more temperate capital cities at the time of recruitment (April).
- The Northern Territory having the most expensive ecstasy prices in the country.
- Notably higher levels of alcohol consumption than the national average.

As a result of these issues, the low number of participants in recent years has made meaningful comparisons over time difficult, both with the national data and previous years' findings in the Northern Territory. In response this, a number of changes to the Northern Territory recruitment methodology were trialled in 2012, which included:

- broadening the criteria to include use of other psychostimulants as well as ecstasy in the previous six months;
- recruiting backpackers and other seasonal workers if they have purchased ecstasy in the Northern Territory; and
- delaying the commencement of recruitment to the end of April to incorporate the dry season.

While these changes demonstrated the potential to increase the sample size, it is proposed that further revisions are made to the recruitment methodology to increase the Northern Territory's sample size in 2013.

BACKGROUND OF EDRS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

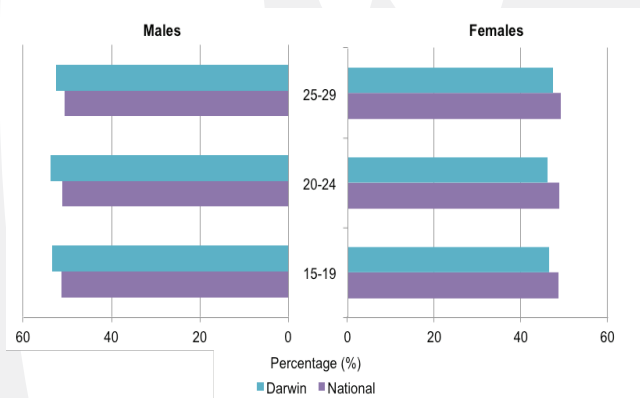
The 2012 Northern Territory (NT) Trends in Ecstasy and Related Drug Markets project represents the ninth year in which data has been collected in the NT on the markets for ecstasy and related drugs (ERD). The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS; formerly the Party Drugs Initiative, or PDI) is the most comprehensive and detailed study of ERD markets in Australia. Using a similar methodology to the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), the EDRS monitors the price, purity and availability of 'ecstasy' (MDMA) and other related drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, gamma-hydroxy-butyrate (GHB) and ketamine. It also examines trends in the use and harms of these drugs. It utilises data from three sources: (a) surveys with regular ecstasy users (REU); (b) surveys with key experts (KE) who have contact with REU through the nature of their work; and (c) the analysis of existing data sources that contain information on ecstasy and other drugs. REU are recruited because they are considered a sentinel group to detect illicit drug trends. The information from REU is, therefore, not representative of ecstasy and other drug users in the general population, but is indicative of emerging trends that may warrant further monitoring.

The findings from each year not only provide a snapshot of the drug markets in the NT, but also help to provide an evidence base for policy decisions, inform harm reduction messages, and provide directions for further investigation when issues of concern are detected. Continued monitoring of the ERD markets in the NT will help add to our understanding of the use of these drugs; the price, purity and availability of these drugs and how these may impact on each other; and the associated harms which may stem from the use of these drugs.

DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE TOP END

At June 2011, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012a) estimated the population of Greater Darwin to be 129,100, making it Australia's smallest capital city. In comparison to all Australian residents, the average age of Darwin's population was 31.4, almost six years lower than the national average of 37.3 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). Darwin was the only capital city where males outnumbered females, with a ratio of 109 males per 100 females, indicating that males comprised a significant proportion of the target demographic for the NT EDRS (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Gender breakdown by age group in Darwin versus the national average



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b

The most recent data available estimated the defence population of the Northern Territory to be 14,007 persons, roughly 10% of the total population of Darwin in 2011 (Northern Territory Government, 2012). As the military maintains a zero tolerance policy to any drug use, the high proportion of defence personnel amongst the target demographic may have contributed to the recruitment difficulties experienced in Darwin.

Compared to other jurisdictions, the NT's population was relatively young, highly mobile and comprised a greater proportion of Indigenous persons and defence personnel than other jurisdictions.

Further to Darwin being Australia's smallest capital and having a large military presence, recruitment difficulties may have been exacerbated by Darwin's geographical location. As Darwin is the second most geographically isolated capital city in Australia after Perth, it is removed from Australia's main drug markets of Sydney and Melbourne. In addition, Darwin has only one main road entering the city, and domestic trafficking into the region may be hampered by this limited infrastructure.

Recruitment strategies trialled in 2012

The EDRS aims to recruit 100 REU in each jurisdiction every year. Typically, all states and territories adhere to the same eligibility criteria when recruiting for the EDRS; that is, participants must have used ecstasy on at least six occasions in the past six months and resided in the jurisdiction's capital city for the majority of the past 12 months. Following the recruitment difficulties experienced in the NT in 2011, in which only 11 participants were recruited, it was proposed that the recruitment eligibility criteria would be broadened for the NT EDRS in 2012 to increase the sample size.

Recruitment strategies trialled for the 2012 NT EDRS:

- *interview persons who had used psychostimulants (including ecstasy) on at least six occasions in the past six months;*
- *commence recruitment further into the 'dry' season when there is more nightlife; and*
- *interview persons who had purchased ERD within the NT, regardless of whether they were a permanent resident.*

Regular psychostimulant use

In 2012, NT residents were eligible to participate if they had used any psychostimulant including ecstasy (e.g. MDA, cocaine, methamphetamine, ketamine, LSD, or an emerging psychoactive substance (EPS) such as mephedrone, 2C-B, 2C-I) on at least six occasions in the past six months. These users were termed regular psychostimulant users (RPU). This broadened criteria resulted in an additional two participants being recruited. Despite expectations that this change in eligibility criteria would result in a boost of the sample size, only a minor increase in the number of participants recruited was observed.

Delayed recruitment

Recruitment for the EDRS traditionally commences at the beginning of April in each jurisdiction. However, unlike the other capital cities, Darwin experiences a largely tropical climate consisting of a 'wet' season (November to March) and a 'dry' season (April to October). It was noted in 2011 that Darwin's seasonal climate may have an impact on the usage of ERD, as there is typically less nightlife, and therefore less illicit drug use, during the wet season. As the EDRS eligibility criteria requires participants to have used ecstasy on six occasions in the past six months, it was expected that those consuming ERD may have tapered their use over the wet season, and therefore potential candidates would not fulfil the frequency of use criterion.

In response to this, recruitment in 2012 commenced at the end of April, as there was an indication that illicit drug use would increase with the onset of the dry season in late March. Unfortunately, delaying recruitment by a few weeks did not seem to have the desired effect on the sample size. It was proposed by local KE that the timing of recruitment in the NT should be further delayed until a few months of the dry season has passed.

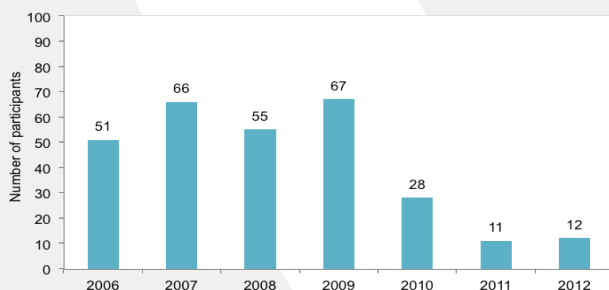
Inclusion of backpackers, travellers and seasonal workers

In past years, many people who had enquired about participation in the NT EDRS were excluded due to not meeting the criteria of having been a resident of Darwin for the 12 months prior to the interview. This was largely due to a high proportion of people constantly travelling in and out of Darwin, including backpackers, travellers and seasonal workers. It was decided that these transient persons would be included in the 2012 sample if they had purchased psychostimulants in Darwin on at least six occasions in the past six months. During the screening process, it was found that the majority of these persons were still not eligible for the study, as the psychostimulants they had recently used had not been sourced from within Darwin, but rather from other cities within Australia or overseas that they had visited during their travels.

Sample size

Twelve REU/RPU residing in Darwin were interviewed for the 2012 NT EDRS (Figure 2) despite the implementation of the broadened eligibility criteria outlined above. It is clear that recruitment of REU/RPU continues to be much more challenging in Darwin compared to other capital cities in Australia.

Figure 2: Number of EDRS participants, NT 2006-2012



Source: EDRS REU/RPU interviews, NT 2006-2012

Population level indicator data

According to the 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011) 3.2% of NT residents aged 14 and older had used ecstasy in the last 12 months

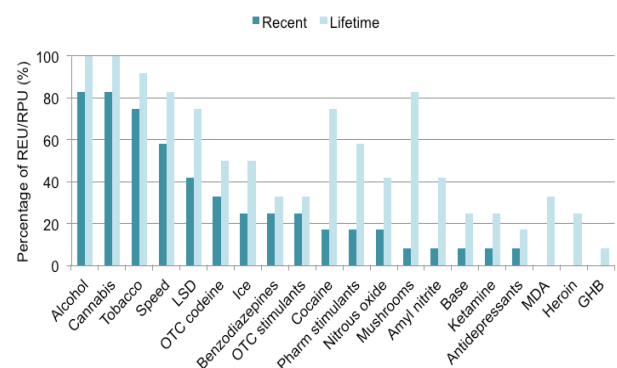
(national range: 1.7-3.7%). However, as the NDSHS does not collect data on the frequency of ecstasy use in the population, the proportion of ecstasy users who use the drug regularly¹ in the NT is unknown.

Other population level indicator data indicates that the NT has the second lowest number of drug consumers and provider arrests in the country, accounting for only 1.5% of the national number of arrests and infringement notices. In 2010/11, the rate of drug arrests (both consumer and provider) was 2.30 per 1,000 persons in the NT (531 arrests in total) and the rate of Drug Infringement Notices issued was 1.91 per 1,000 persons in the NT (442 infringements in total) (Australian Crime Commission, 2012). Unfortunately, as drug seizures are not routinely tested, there are no data on the purity of ecstasy in the NT available.

Drug use history and current drug use

Participants were asked about their lifetime and recent use of over 20 different drug types². While the findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size, it seems that experience with a broad range of drugs was common (Figure 3). NT REU/RPU had used an average of six different drugs in the past six months (SD=2.2). The most common drugs used recently included alcohol, cannabis, tobacco and speed. Similarly, when asked what drugs participants had used in their lifetime, alcohol, cannabis, tobacco and speed were commonly reported. Mushrooms, LSD and cocaine were also reported to have been used by a high proportion of NT REU/RPU in their lifetime.

Figure 3: Lifetime and recent polydrug use among REU/RPU, NT



Source: EDRS REU/RPU interviews, NT 2012

Note: OTC (over the counter). Reported use of OTC codeine and OTC stimulants refers to non-pain use only.

¹ Regular ecstasy use (REU) and regular psychostimulant use (RPU) is defined as use by any route of administration on *at least* 6 separate occasions in the past 6 months.

² 'Lifetime' usage refers to drugs that have ever been used. 'Recent' usage refers to drugs that had been used in the six months prior to the interview.

High levels of alcohol consumption

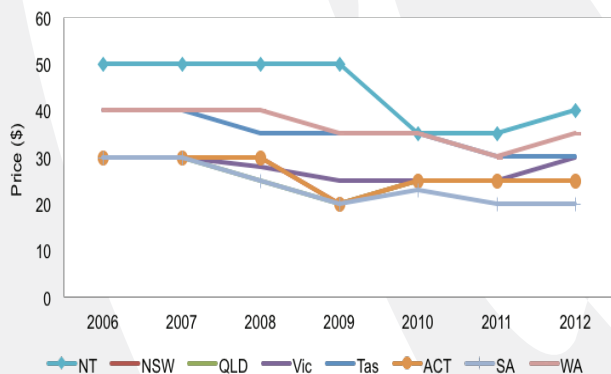
Per capita alcohol consumption in the NT is around 50% higher than the national average (Skov, Chikritzhs, Li, Pircher, & Whetton, 2010). A report prepared by The South Australian Centre for Economic Studies (2009) stated that levels of alcohol-related harms in the NT were at a rate more than four times that of the national level. In light of these findings, it appears that the usage of alcohol is at a much higher rate in the NT and may indicate a preference for alcohol consumption over other drugs. This preference may be due to ERD being relatively difficult to acquire and the comparatively higher cost for these drugs in the NT than in other jurisdictions (Figure 4).

ECSTASY TRENDS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Market price

Traditionally, the NT has had the most expensive ecstasy prices in the country (Figure 4). Data from the Australian Crime Commission's annual Illicit Drug Data Report also reflects these findings (Australian Crime Commission, 2012).

Figure 4: Median price of last ecstasy purchase (\$) by jurisdiction, 2006-2012

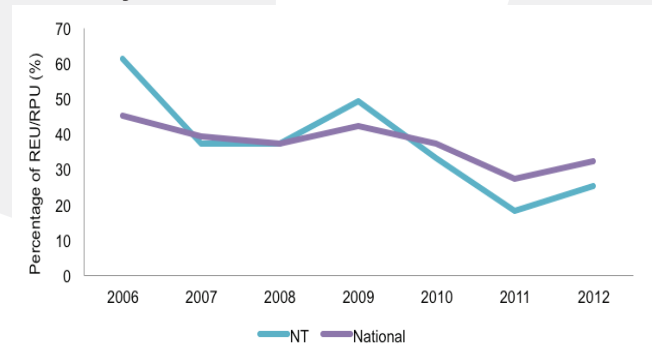


Source: EDRS REU/RPU interviews, 2012

Drug of choice

In recent years, the EDRS had noticed a downward trend in the percentage of participants reporting ecstasy as their drug of choice (i.e. their preferred drug). Compared to 2011, a higher proportion of participants in 2012 nominated ecstasy as their drug of choice. Although trends in the NT should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size, it appears that the national trend may also be reflected in the NT (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Ecstasy as drug of choice, NT and nationally, 2006-2012

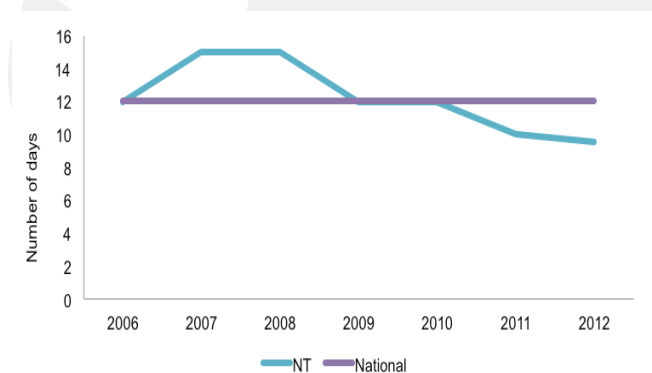


Source: EDRS REU/RPU interviews, 2012

Frequency of ecstasy use

The frequency of ecstasy use among REU/RPU in the NT has generally remained stable over the past several years (Figure 6). NT participants reported ecstasy use occurring approximately fortnightly (range: 10-15 days) in the six months prior to interview, which remains comparable to national trends given the small sample size.

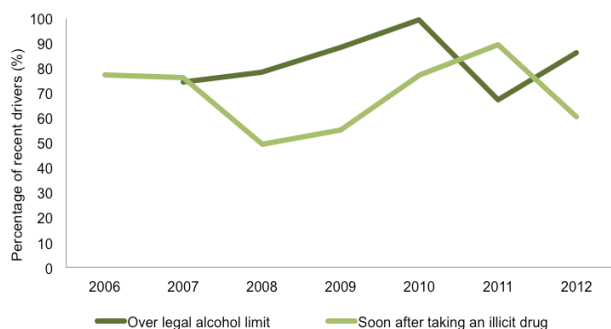
Figure 6: Median days of ecstasy use in the past six months, NT and nationally, 2006-2012



Source: EDRS REU/RPU interviews, 2012

Driving over the legal alcohol limit and soon after taking (an) illicit drug/s is a reoccurring risk behaviour that has been noted by both KE and EDRS participants for several years. Among those who had driven in the six months prior to interview (Figure 7), the vast majority (86%; range: 67-99%) had driven over the legal limit for alcohol on at least one occasion over the same time period. Driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs is a reoccurring theme in KE interviews and the lack of alternative transport options in Darwin have been consistently cited as a possible contributing factor.

Figure 7: Proportion of NT REU/RPU who had driven* over the legal alcohol limit or soon after taking an illicit drug



Source: EDRS REU/RPU interviews, NT 2012

Note: Data on driving over the legal alcohol limit is not available for 2006

* Among those who had driven in the six months prior to interview

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

The EDRS has always struggled to fulfill recruitment quotas in the NT, despite employing the same recruitment methodology as other jurisdictions. In response to the small sample size recruited in 2011, the 2012 NT EDRS trialed a number of changes to the recruitment strategy, including broadening the eligibility criteria to allow use of other psychostimulants as well as ecstasy in the previous six months, the inclusion of backpackers if they have purchased in the NT, and delaying recruitment by a few weeks to incorporate the dry season. The combined effect of these changes appeared to have a minimal impact on recruitment overall, with a final sample of 12 REU/RPU interviewed in the NT.

The challenging nature of recruiting REU/RPU in the NT may in part be due to the reasons previously discussed, including a preference for other drugs (including alcohol) and the high costs of ecstasy in the NT. In addition, the high proportion of defence personnel in the key age demographic for recruitment may represent a further challenge due to the military's zero tolerance approach to drug use. Though results do suggest that the relatively low preference for ecstasy is consistent with the national EDRS sample, the small sample size precludes any meaningful conclusions to be drawn from this dataset.

Further adjustments will continue to be made to the NT's recruitment methodology in 2013 to increase the sample size. The broadened criteria of allowing use of any psychostimulant in the previous six months and the inclusion of backpackers if they have purchased in the NT will continue to be trialed. In addition to this, it was noted among both potential candidates

and KE that if the study were to be conducted later in the year (further into the dry season), these potential candidates would most likely meet the frequency of use criterion. As such, recruitment for the 2013 NT EDRS will commence in June, which is three months into the dry season. It is speculated that nightlife and consequently ERD use may be more frequent mid-year due to the better climate and a greater number of events and festivals being held from March onwards, thus enabling the NT EDRS to recruit a higher number of participants at this time point than in previous years.

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