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Recruiting a sample of regular ecstasy users (REU) in Australia's remote Top End: price, population and seasonal variability

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KEY FINDINGS

Eligibility for EDRS participation is based on regular ecstasy use, that is, use on at least 6 occasions in the 6 months prior to interview. While the use of ecstasy is occurring in the Northern Territory it appears that the frequency of use is likely too low to recruit a sample of meaningful size based on this criteria. This may be in part due to:

- Darwin being the smallest capital city in Australia and its population being nearly half the size of the country's 2nd smallest capital city, Hobart.
- The Northern Territory (NT) having the most expensive ecstasy prices in the country.
- Seasonal differences between monsoonal Darwin and other, more temperate capital cities at the time of recruitment (April).
- Large number of transient young people, 'backpackers' and other young tourists, military personnel and seasonal workers.
- Levels of alcohol consumption much higher than the national average.
- The remote geographical location away from the major drug markets of Sydney and Melbourne.

INTRODUCTION

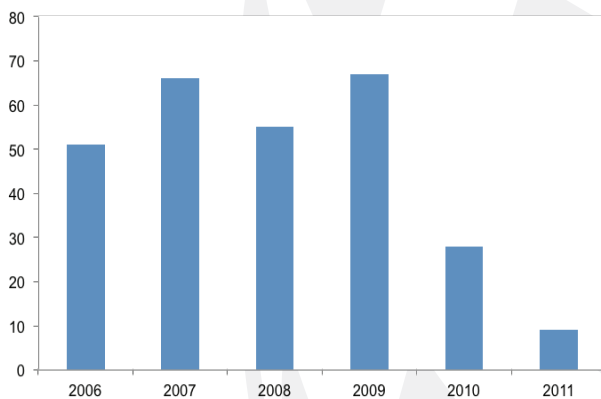
The 2011 NT Trends in Ecstasy and Related Drug Markets report represents the eighth year in which data has been collected in the Northern Territory (NT) on the markets for ecstasy and related drugs (ERD). The Ecstasy and related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS; formerly the Party Drugs Initiative, or PDI) is the most comprehensive and detailed study of ERD markets in the country. 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.

RECRUITMENT:

In 2011, 11 REU were interviewed in Darwin for the EDRS despite the practice of a consistent recruitment methodology used in past years. The EDRS attempts to recruit 100 REU in each state and territory of Australia. Recruitment of REU appears to be much more difficult in Darwin, possibly due to a number of factors, which will be explored below.

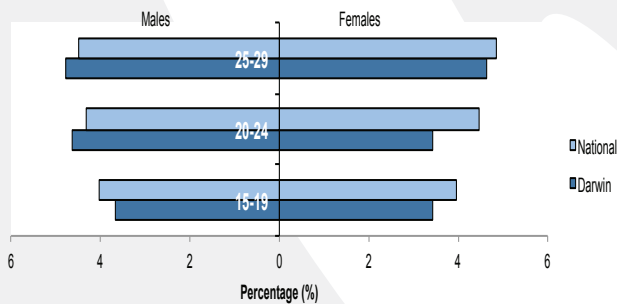
Figure 1: Number of EDRS participants, NT 2006-2011



Size of Darwin

In the 2011 census, the population of Darwin was 127,500, almost half that of Hobart (212,019), making it Australia's smallest capital city. The average age of Darwin's population is 31.5, three and a half years lower than the national average of 35. Also, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in the 15-19, 20-24 and the 25-29 age brackets, the ratio of males to females was 1.04, 1.4 and 1.04, respectively, indicating that males comprised a significant proportion of the target demographic for the EDRS (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of males and females by age group in Darwin versus the national average

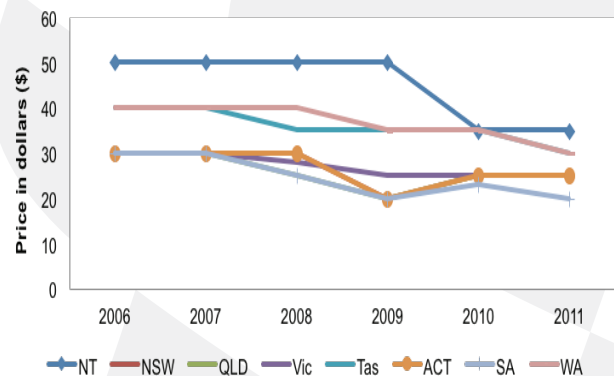


The most recent statistics available puts the military population of Darwin at 12,953, roughly 10.7% of the total population of Darwin in 2007 of 120,890 (Defence Force Australia 2007). As the military maintains a zero tolerance policy to any drug use, the high proportion of military personnel amongst the target demographic adds to the complexity of recruitment in Darwin. Additionally, Darwin is the second most geographically isolated capital city in Australia after Perth, and thus isolated from the Australia's main drug markets of Sydney and Melbourne. Finally, Darwin has only one main road entering the city and domestic trafficking into the region may be hampered by this limited infrastructure.

Price of ecstasy

Traditionally, the Northern Territory has had the most expensive ecstasy prices in the country (Figure 3). Data from the Australian Crime Commission's annual Illicit Drug Data Report also reflects these findings (Australian Crime Commission, 2011).

Figure 3: Median Price of last ecstasy purchase (\$) by jurisdiction



Eligibility

Participants must have used ecstasy on at least six occasions in the past six months in order to be eligible for inclusion in the EDRS. Many people interested in participating in the EDRS in the NT were excluded due to not meeting this criterion, having used in the past six months but not as much as six times. Unlike other capital cities, Darwin experiences a largely tropical climate consisting of two main seasons, a 'wet' and a 'dry' season. The wet season consists of high temperatures during the day followed by heavy rain at night, while the dry season consists of more temperate weather. Many participants explained that in the six months preceding recruitment in March, largely comprising the 'wet' season, they did not use

ecstasy very frequently due to less nightlife activity on account of the heavy rainfall. However, with the onset of dry season in late March and early April there was an indication that illicit drug ecstasy usage would increase again in the upcoming months. It would appear that during EDRS recruitment in April and May, those consuming ecstasy and related drugs may have tapered use over the wet season and may not have used it frequently enough to be eligible for the study.

Additionally, many people who enquired about participation in the 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 due to a large proportion of backpackers, travelers and seasonal workers in Darwin who may have met the frequency of usage criterion due to use in other states or countries, but did not use ecstasy in Darwin six times. Also, as was the case with much of domestic or international backpacker population, the ecstasy that they did use was not sourced from within Darwin, but rather from other cities within Australia, and thus they did not meet eligibility.

Population level indicator data

According to the 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (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 that use the drug regularly in the Northern Territory is unknown. Other population-level indicator data indicates that the Northern Territory has the 2nd lowest number of drug consumer and provider arrests in the country, accounting for only 1.5% of national number of arrests and infringement notices. In 2009/10 there were 772 arrests (both consumer and provider) and 466 Drug Infringement Notices issued (national range: ACT 459-QLD 24,013) (Australian Crime Commission, 2011). Unfortunately as drug seizures are not routinely tested there is no data on the purity of ecstasy in the NT available.

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) reported that levels of alcohol-related harms in the NT were at a rate more than four times that of the national level. This indicates that usage of alcohol is at a much

higher rate in the Northern Territory and may indicate a preference for alcohol consumption over other drugs. This may be due to ecstasy being relatively difficult to acquire and the comparative higher cost than in other states (Figure 3), thereby making ecstasy a less attractive option than in other states.

Ecstasy trends the Northern Territory

Nationally the EDRS has noticed a downward trend in the percentage of participants reporting ecstasy as their drug of choice (i.e. their preferred drug) over time. Although trends in the NT should be interpreted with caution due to the sample size, it appears that this trend may also be applicable in to the NT (figure 4). The frequency of use ecstasy among REU in the NT has generally remained stable over the past several years with use occurring approximately fortnightly (range: 10-15 days) in the 6 months prior to interview (figure 5), which remains comparable to national trends.

Figure 4: Ecstasy as drug of choice

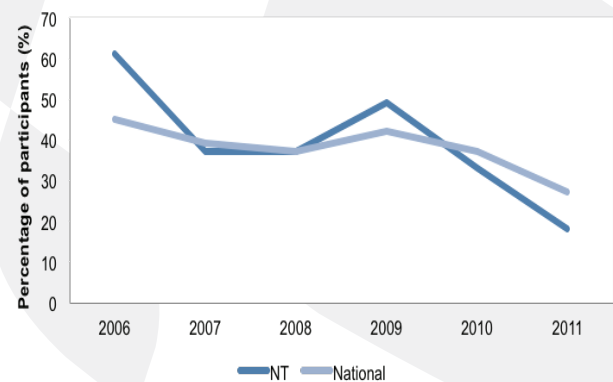
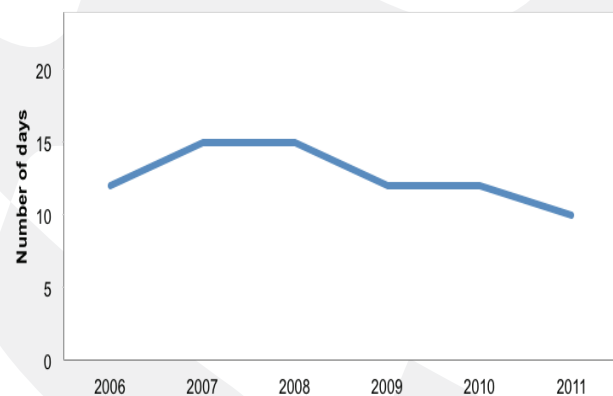
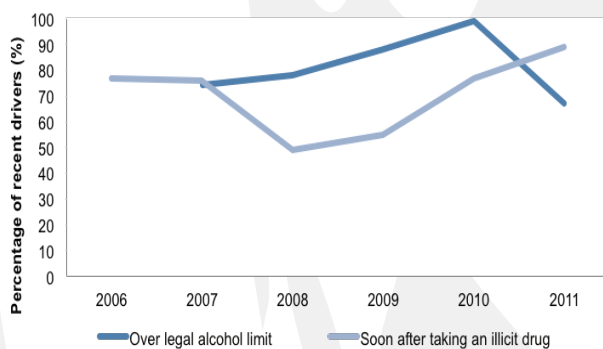


Figure 5: Median days of ecstasy use in past 6 months of NT EDRS participants



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 key experts and EDRS participants over the last several years. Among those who had driven in the 6 months prior to interview the vast majority (range: 67-99%) had driven over the legal limit for alcohol on at least one occasion over the same time period (Figure 6). Driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs is a reoccurring theme in key expert interviews and the lack of alternative transport options in Darwin are have been consistently cited as a possible contributing factor. (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Proportion of NT EDRS participants that had driven* soon after taking an illicit drug or over the legal alcohol limit



*Among those who had driven in the 6 months prior to interview
 NB: data on alcohol not available for 2006

CONCLUSION:

Recruitment to the EDRS has always been complex in the NT. Although recruitment methodology has remained consistent since the inception of the EDRS, these same methods applied in 2011 failed to attract the numbers seen in previous years. We speculate that this is due in part to a decline in the frequency of use of ecstasy in potential candidates, a preference for other drugs (including alcohol) and the high costs of ecstasy. A large number of potential participants were excluded from participating due to not meeting the required frequency (at least six times in the previous six months). A number of key experts also suggested that the seasonal differences between monsoonal Darwin and the other more temperate capital cities at the time of recruitment (April-May) may have influenced eligibility.

A number of potential candidates stated that if the study were to be conducted later in the year (further into the 'dry season') they would most likely meet the frequency of usage criterion. Additionally, a large proportion of Darwin's population is transient, consisted of backpackers, travelers and seasonal workers, thereby

excluding these participants from recruitment. Finally, the increasing numbers in the military population in Darwin who, due to a zero-tolerance approach to drug use, are much less likely to discuss ecstasy use, would also appear to be responsible for the decline in recruitment numbers. As a result of the low number of participants (n=11), comparisons with previous years have been withheld and any trends should be interpreted with caution. Though results do suggest that the declining preference for ecstasy is consistent with the national EDRS sample, the low sample size precludes any meaningful conclusions to be drawn from this dataset. To account for these issues, recruitment in 2012 will trial a number of changes; broadening the criteria to include 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 consider changing the timing of recruitment to incorporate the dry season in future.

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