

Media Representation of Methamphetamine-Related Deaths: Exploring Links to Public Stigma and Support for Harm Reduction

Authors: [STEPH KERSHAW](#)¹, [JESSICA DENG](#)¹, [GEORGETTE BOREL](#)¹, [HARRY SUMNALL](#)², and [CATH CHAPMAN](#)¹

¹The Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ²Public Health Institute, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom

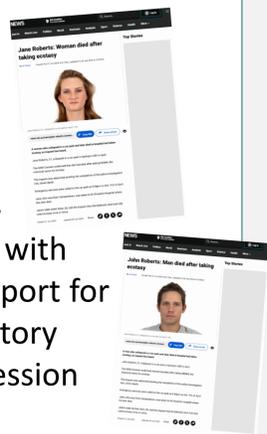
Background

- Drug related deaths are a significant and growing public health concern in Australia and internationally.
- There has been a fourfold increase in methamphetamine-related deaths observed over the last 20 years in Australia, with deaths reaching a record high (2.4 deaths per 100,000) in 2020.¹
- Since 2013, Australians have consistently rated methamphetamine/amphetamine as the drug of most concern to the community, and the drug most likely to be associated with a 'drug problem'.²
- Approximately 40-60% of Australians hold negative or stigmatizing attitudes towards people who use methamphetamine.³
- These attitudes are likely shaped by stigmatizing and sensationalist media representations.⁴
- Stigma towards people who use drugs has been found to contribute to poor mental and physical health, reduced help-seeking behaviours delayed treatment utilisation, and increased risk of overdose and death.^{5,6}

This study aimed to examine the relationships between media representations of drug-related deaths in news articles and stigma towards the person who used drugs, along with attitudes towards harm reduction policy.

Methods

- A nationally representative sample of Australians (N = 1490) took part in an online experimental study (15 – 20 mins).
- Participants were randomized to 1 of 8 simulated news stories depicting a drug-related death.
- Each news story varied by drug type (methamphetamine or MDMA 'ecstasy'), age of the person depicted (younger or older), and gender of the person depicted (female or male).
- Primary analysis was a 2x2x2 factorial MANOVA with stigma towards the depicted characters and support for harm reduction as dependent variables. Exploratory analyses were conducted using a four-step regression model.



PREDICTORS OF STIGMA TOWARDS STORY CHARACTER

STEP 1

- Gender of character
- Older character*
- Methamphetamine*

STEP 2

- Gender of character
- Older character*
- Methamphetamine*
- Older participants*
- Male participants*
- Education
- Income

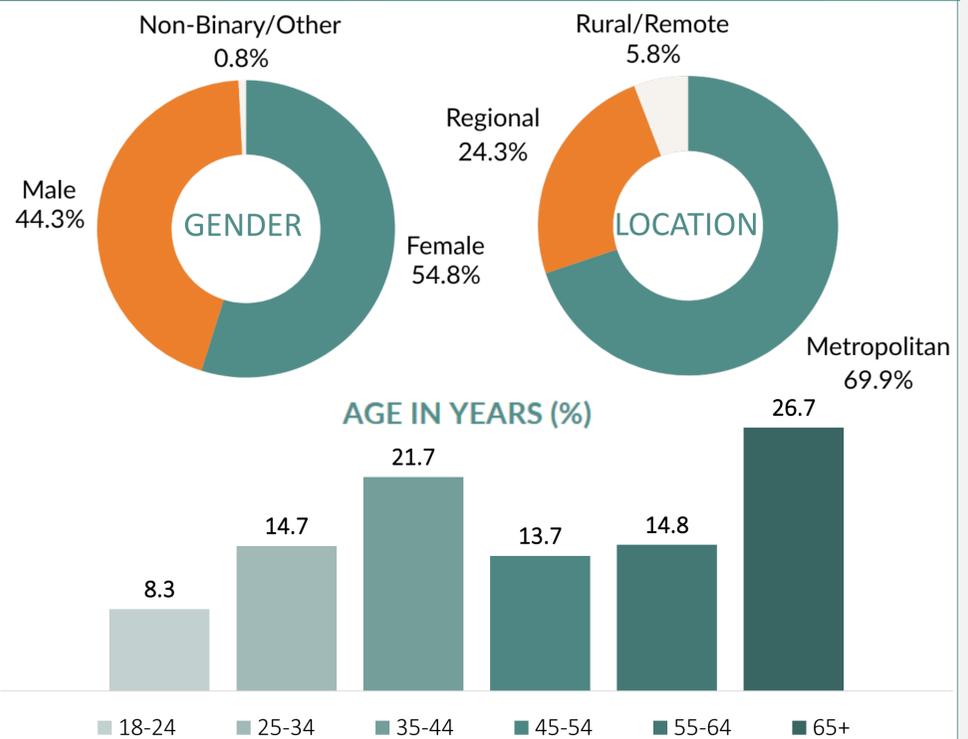
STEP 3

- Gender of character
- Older character*
- Methamphetamine*
- Older participants*
- Male participants
- Education
- Income
- Higher belief in a just world*
- Lower empathic perspective*
- News media literacy*

STEP 4

- Gender of character
- Older character*
- Methamphetamine*
- Older participants*
- Male participants
- Education
- Income
- Higher belief in a just world*
- Lower empathic perspective*
- News media literacy
- Lower support for harm reduction*
- Lower support for legalisation*
- Support for higher penalties*
- Higher general stigma*
- Level of familiarity
- Drug knowledge

Results



- The study sample was majority female (n = 815; 54.7%) and the mean age was 48.5 years (SD 17.73).
- Stigma was higher toward depictions of older characters compared to younger characters ($p < .001$) and towards those who had used methamphetamine compared to ecstasy ($p < .001$).
- There was no significant main effect of story gender, age, or drug type on support for harm reduction.



Conclusions

Certain characteristics in news stories about drug-related deaths are associated with higher stigma towards the depicted person.

Improving how the media report and frame drug-related deaths represents an important avenue for reducing stigma towards people who use drugs and, in turn, foster public support for evidence-based drug policies.



Keen to know more?

Contact Dr Steph Kershaw, steph.kershaw@sydney.edu.au

References

- ¹Chrzanowska, A., Sutherland, R., Degenhardt, L., & Peacock, A. (2024). Trends in Drug-Related Hospitalisations in Australia, 2002-2022.
- ²Australian Institute of Health & Welfare. (2024). *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022-2023*.
- ³Deen, H., Kershaw, S., Newton, N., Stapinski, L., Birrell, L., Debenham, J., Champion, K. E., Kay-Lambkin, F., Teesson, M., & Chapman, C. (2021). Stigma, discrimination and crystal methamphetamine ('ice'): Current attitudes in Australia. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 87, 102982.
- ⁴Rawstorne, P., O'Connor, R., Cohn, A., Fredrickson, A., Jayasinha, R., Hayden, A., Lancaster, K., & Nathan, S. (2020). Australian news media reporting of methamphetamine: an analysis of print media 2014-2016. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of public health*, 44(6), 468-475.
- ⁵Kershaw, S., Sunderland, M., Grager, A., Birrell, L., Deen, H., Newton, N. C., Stapinski, L. A., Champion, K. E., Kay-Lambkin, F., & Teesson, M. (2024). Perceived barriers to help-seeking for people who use crystal methamphetamine: Perspectives of people with lived experience, family members and health workers.
- ⁶McKetin, R., Degenhardt, L., Shanahan, M., Baker, A. L., Lee, N. K., & Lubman, D. I. (2018). Health service utilisation attributable to methamphetamine use in Australia: Patterns, predictors and national impact. *Drug and alcohol review*, 37(2), 196-204.



THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Matilda Centre

This study was supported by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council via Fellowships (LB, GNT2016301, & CC, GNT2026380) and via a Centre of Research Excellence in the Prevention of Mental Illness and Substance Use (PREMISE Next Generation; GNT2035308).