Disruption to Australian heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and ecstasy markets with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions

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Introduction / Issues: Changes to drug markets can affect drug use and harms. We aimed to describe heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and ecstasy market trends in Australia following the introduction of COVID-19 pandemic-associated restrictions.

Method / Approach: From 2014 to 2023, Australians residing in capital cities who regularly inject drugs (n~=900 annually) or regularly use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants (n~=800 annually) participated in cross-sectional interviews. We estimated generalised additive models that compared self-reported market indicator data (price, availability, and purity) before (2014-2019) and after (2020-2023) the introduction of pandemic-associated restrictions.

Key Findings OR Results: We observed immediate impacts to heroin and methamphetamine markets in 2020; price per cap/point increased (β: $9.69, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 2.25-17.1 and β: $40.3, 95% CI: 33.1-47.5, respectively), while perceived availability (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] for 'easy'/'very easy' to obtain: 0.38, 95% CI: 0.24-0.59 and aOR: 0.08, 95% CI: 0.03-0.25, respectively) and perceived purity (aOR for 'high' purity: 0.36, 95% CI: 0.23-0.54 and aOR: 0.33, 95% CI: 0.20-0.54, respectively) decreased. There was no longer evidence for change after 2020. Impacts to ecstasy markets were most evident in 2022: the price per gram increased (β: A$92.8, 95% CI: 61.6-124), and perceived availability (aOR: 0.18, 95% CI: 0.09-0.35) and purity (aOR: 0.31, 95% CI: 0.18-0.55) decreased. Preliminary 2023 data suggest price and perceived purity remain affected for ecstasy, while there is no evidence for continued impact to perceived availability. Effects to cocaine markets were minimal, with only purity affected (perceived decrease in 2021 and 2022).

Discussions and Conclusions: There were distinct disruptions to illicit drug markets in Australia after the COVID-19 pandemic began; the timing and magnitude varied by drug.

Implications for Practice or Policy: The resilience of Australian drug markets to intense supply chain disruption suggests interventions that aim to reduce drug-related harm via supply reduction may be less effective.

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