

Trends in drug use and possession in the Northern Territory across 10 years

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Introduction and Aims: Research on drug use overwhelmingly explores the individual etiology of use and harms resulting. Less research, however, examines the broader trends in arrests for drug-related offences, such as the role of location type. We analysed data obtained from Northern Territory (NT) Police Force on apprehensions for all drug-related offences across ten years (2011-2021), investigating factors associated with the number or type of drug-related offences and variation across time.

Method: Bivariate analyses were used to examine whether age, gender, Indigeneity, and location type were associated with offence type at the individual level. Socioeconomic and health indicators drawn from census data were used to explore factors correlated with drug crimes at postcode level.

Results: Drug-related arrests demonstrate a bell curve distribution, with 733 offences in 2011, 617 offences in 2021, and peaking 2016 with 1,193 offences. Indigenous persons were overrepresented compared to the population composition in the NT, with 80% charged with drug possession, compared to 69% for non-Indigenous persons. Between 2011 and 2021 there was a 50% increase in arrests for drug paraphernalia and a 25% decrease in arrests for drug possession. Offence location exhibited shifting patterns across time and greater education and employment status was positively correlated with the total number of drug-related arrests.

Discussions and Conclusions: Relationships between First Nations peoples across drug offences over the past 10 years warrants further investigation. The link between offence type and location requires additional research given higher rates of drug use charges in regional areas.

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