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Findings from the DUMA program: Internet access, and frequency and nature of use among police detainees

Dr Susan Goldsmid and Eileen Patterson

The advent of the Internet has created opportunities for the global exchange of information and purchase of goods and services. However, it has also facilitated the creation of online illicit drug markets and forums in which drug-related information can be exchanged between users. Bruno, Poesiat & Matthews (2013) reported that illicit drug-specific search terms (such as cocaine, ecstasy, hallucinogens and high) were used, on average, 39,700 times per month in the Google search engine in Australia. Examining access to and the extent of engagement with the Internet in illicit drug-using populations may provide an indication of the extent to which the online illicit drug market is usurping the physical illicit drug market.

In 2006, Cunningham, Selby, Kypri & Humphreys examined Internet access in a sample of smokers, drinkers and illicit drug users ($n=2,584$) derived from the general population in Canada, through a random digit dialling technique. Restricting the findings to illicit drug users, 77 percent of cannabis users and 75 percent of cocaine users reported having Internet access. It would be anticipated that current Internet access rates would be considerably higher in all subgroups of the population, including illicit drug users, than those recorded in 2006.

Barratt, Ferris & Winstock (2013) examined awareness and engagement in the online illicit drug market Silk Road in a sample of recent drug users in the United Kingdom ($n=4,315$), Australia ($n=2,761$) and the United States ($n=2,394$). Participation was via an online survey so this study does not inform our understanding of levels of Internet access among drug-using populations, other than to suggest that Internet access may be prevalent as a large sample size was achieved. More than half of the sample had heard of Silk Road, with some variations by country observed. Approximately one-quarter of participants who had heard of Silk Road reported consuming drugs purchased from that site. The most common reason for not having purchased drugs from Silk Road, despite having heard of the online market, was adequate access to drugs through connections and networks in the physical illicit drug market.

The current study examined rates of Internet access among Australian police detainees. For those detainees with Internet access, frequency of use, online activities engaged in and online illicit drug market participation were examined.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) has monitored drug use and crime trends across Australia through the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program since 1999. Each quarter, detainees held in police custody at various sites (police stations and watch houses) across Australia are invited to participate in an interview-assisted survey; participation is voluntary and confidential. The survey comprises two components a core questionnaire and a quarterly addendum. The core survey elicits data on demographics, illicit drug use and offending. Addenda (short supplementary surveys) are developed each quarter to collect information on emerging issues of policy relevance. Urine samples are also requested in alternate quarters. Urine samples are subjected to urinalysis and provide an objective measure of illicit drug use.

In quarter one of 2014, 535 police detainees provided responses to an addendum that examined access to the Internet and frequency of engagement in online activities, including illicit drug purchasing. This addendum was administered at five sites—East Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, as well as Kings Cross and Surry Hills in Sydney. The majority of detainees interviewed were male (80%); the over-representation of males in the sample is consistent with the male-to-female ratio in the detainee population. On average, detainees were 32 years of age, with the youngest 18 years and the oldest 76 years of age.

Frequency of Internet use

The majority of police detainees (71%, n=381) reported having used the Internet in the 30 days before detention. Of those, 71 percent reported daily use of the Internet; this was followed by weekly use (19%), monthly use (5%) and fortnightly use (4%).

Devices used by detainees to access the Internet

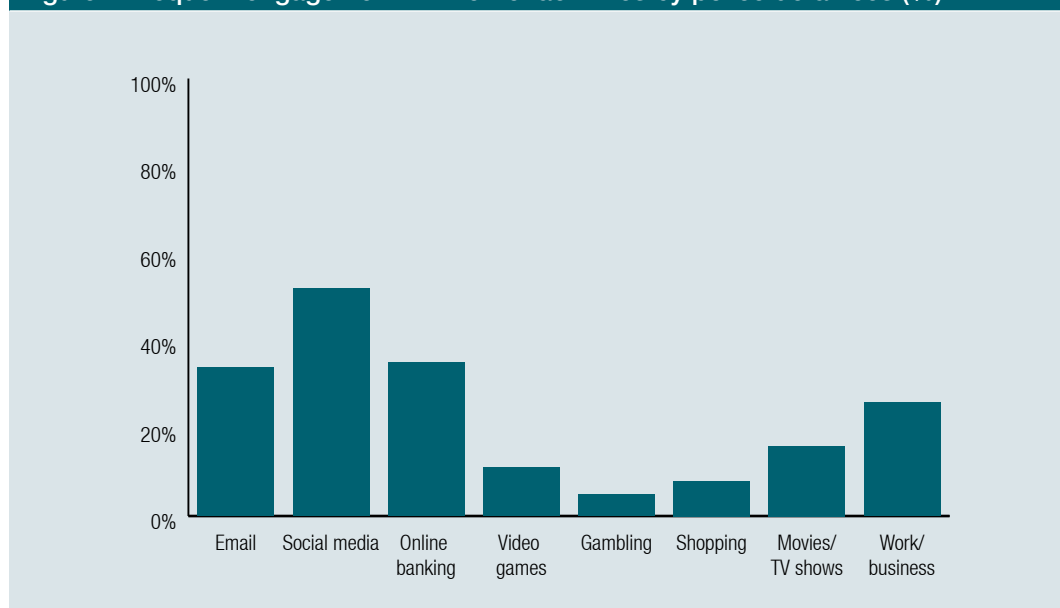
Of the detainees who had used the Internet in the 30 days before detention (n=381), 70 percent reported doing so via smart phones, 35 percent via laptops, 26 percent via desktop computers and 21 percent via tablet devices (detainees could select more than one device). The majority of detainees (82%) reported that they usually accessed the Internet at home. This was followed by public places (42%), at work (23%) and from an Internet café (5%). Therefore, the majority of police detainees reported having regular and private Internet access.

Frequency of detainee engagement in online activities

Detainees who had used the Internet in the 30 days before detention (n=381) were asked to indicate how frequently they engaged in a range of online activities. Response alternatives were rated on a five-point scale from never (0) to very often (4). Responses for activities engaged in 'often' or 'very often' were combined to indicate frequent use (see Figure 1).

Fifty-two percent (n=197) of detainees reported frequent use of the Internet for social media, 35 percent (n=134) for online banking, 34 percent (n=127) for email and 26 percent (n=100) for work. A small proportion of detainees reported frequent use of the Internet for watching movies or TV shows (16%, n=60), online video gaming (11%, n=42), shopping (8%, n=31) and gambling (5%, n=19).

Figure 1 Frequent engagement in Internet activities by police detainees (%)



Notes: Excludes missing data; frequent use includes 'Often' and 'Very Often'

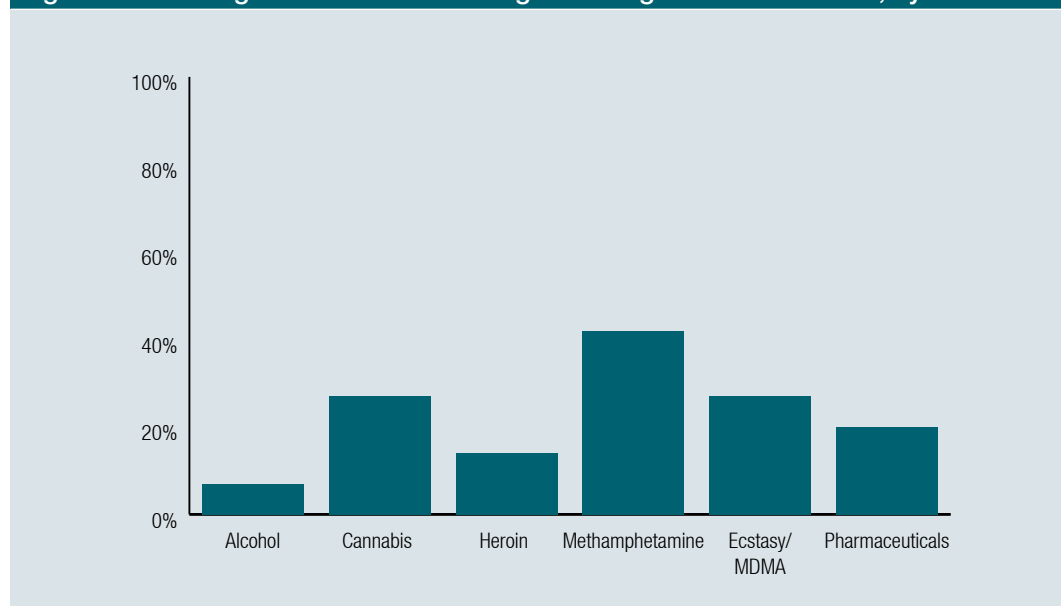
Source: AIC DUMA Collection Q1 2014 [computer file]

The majority of detainees reported never having used the Internet for online gambling (81%, n=307), video gaming (62%, n=236), shopping (59%, n=223) or watching movies or TV shows (54%, n=203). A smaller proportion of detainees reported having never used the Internet for online banking (38%, n=143), email (27%, n=104) or social media (22%, n=83). Almost half (47%, n=178) of detainees reported having never used the Internet for the purpose of work. This finding is likely to be influenced by the high rate of unemployment in this sample: 58 percent of detainees who reported having never used the Internet for work also reported being unemployed.

Online drug-related activities

Almost one-third (31%) of detainees reported that they sourced information about illicit drugs online. The drug that detainees most commonly reported accessing information on was methamphetamine (42%), followed by cannabis (27%), ecstasy/MDMA (27%), pharmaceuticals (20%), heroin (14%) and alcohol (7%) (see Figure 2) (detainees could nominate more than one substance). The nature of these online searches cannot be determined from the data. However, only five percent (n=8) of detainees reported purchasing illicit drugs online. This suggests that the majority of drug-related Internet searches were for reasons other than illicit drug purchase.

Figure 2 Percentage of detainees sourcing illicit drug information online, by substance



Notes: Excludes missing data; respondents could nominate multiple substances; methamphetamine includes speed and ice forms

Source: AIC DUMA Collection Q1 2014 [computer file]

A small number of detainees reported that they may consider buying drugs online in the future (n=12). When asked why they would purchase drugs online, responses included—cheaper prices (n=7), convenience (n=1), ease of access (n=1), quality (n=2), the ability to read customer reviews of the product (n=1), and as an alternative to the physical drug market (n=1). Detainees who had purchased drugs online (n=8) also provided information on why they had done so; responses included—cheaper prices (n=4), curiosity (n=1), convenience (n=3), avoidance of punishment (n=1), range (n=1), quality (n=3) and professionalism of the market (n=1). In both instances, detainees were able to nominate more than one reason.

Conclusion

The majority of police detainees have regular and private access to the Internet. More than half of the detainees with Internet access reported daily use. The most frequent activities engaged in online were social media, online banking, email and work. These activities are consistent with what may be expected of Internet use in the general community. A small proportion of detainees reported frequent use of the Internet for video gaming, gambling,

shopping and watching TV shows or movies, with a greater number of detainees reporting having never used the Internet for these activities.

Very few detainees reported purchasing illicit drugs online. However, approximately one-third of detainees with Internet access reported sourcing information about drugs online. The substance most searched for was methamphetamine. The nature of the online searches cannot be determined from the data, but may have included searches for information on use, side-effects or help-seeking. It is unlikely that the searches were for purchase information as only five percent of detainees reported purchasing drugs online and only three percent reported considering purchasing drugs online. In terms of help-seeking, the findings suggest that detainees are capable of engaging with online resources, in that the majority of detainees have regular and private Internet access.

As 73 percent of the sample tested positive for recent illicit drug use via urinalysis, but only five percent reported purchasing drugs online, this suggests a clear preference in this sample for obtaining drugs through the physical, rather than online, illicit drug market. It will be of interest to monitor this preference over time. It is possible that the lack of engagement in the online drug market reflects a general lack of engagement with the Internet for purchasing activities, with online shopping also being an infrequently engaged in activity. Alternatively, with high levels of drug dependence in the detainee population, the immediacy of the physical drug market may drive this preference.

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All URLs correct at March 2015

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