



# Research in Practice

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## 'Initiation into drug use' addendum: Findings from the DUMA program

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### Key findings

- The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) interviewed 842 detainees about their first experience of drug use as part of the AIC's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program. Detainees were asked to recount the reasons why they first tried drugs, as well as why they continued to use them. Those detainees who had abstained were asked to nominate the factors that were important in their decision to not use drugs.
- Four of five detainees had tried cannabis (81%), more than half had tried amphetamines (55%) and one-third reported the use of illegal opiates (32%) in their lifetime.
- One in four detainees who had tried at least one illicit drug (27%) did so primarily as a way of coping with family, relationship, school or employment problems.
- Of those detainees who had been offered but had not yet tried an illicit drug, the majority were 'just not interested' or had observed the (presumably negative) effects of intoxication on someone else.
- Nearly one in five detainees (17%) who had not yet tried illicit drugs reported that it was, in part, because of knowledge or information they had gained from education or awareness about the drug.
- One in four of those who did not stop using illicit drugs (26%) reported that coping with family, relationship or other life problems was a key reason for their continued use.

### Introduction

The age at which an individual first experiments with illicit drugs has been of significant interest to policymakers and practitioners, primarily because research has persistently shown a link between early juvenile onset of drug use and less favourable health and criminal justice outcomes in adulthood. In the Australian context, studies have shown:

- drug users who have regular contact with the criminal justice system typically commenced their drug use at earlier ages (Gaffney et al. 2010; Johnson 2001);
- even within the drug-using offender population, those with a recent history of violent or prolific property offending typically commenced drug use and progressed to regular drug use earlier than those with no such history (Makkai & Payne 2003); and

- the risk that an offender will progress to serious and frequent offending was highest when both drug use and offending first began at younger than average ages (Payne 2006).

Although there is broad agreement that early initiation into drug use and subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system are correlated, there still remains considerable debate regarding the direction of causality. Some suggest that early drug use can act as a gateway or 'stepping stone' to more significant drug use and other problem behaviours (Kandel, Yamaguchi & Chen 1992), while others argue that drug use does not cause criminal behaviour, but rather, there is a shared or common aetiology, such as low self control or high impulsivity (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990).

Although much effort has been made in the Australian context to profile ages of initiation across various criminal justice populations (detainees, prisoners, juvenile offenders etc), an examination of the reasons

## A demographic snapshot of the DUMA sample completing the 'Drug Use Initiation Addendum': Quarter 2, 2009

- In total, 842 adult police detainees were interviewed, of which 84 percent (n=711) were male.
- The age of detainees ranged from 18 to 75 years, with an average age of 31 years for adult detainees.
- Half of all adult detainees (52%) reported living in a premise that they either privately owned or rented in the 30 days prior to being detained, while four percent reported living at no fixed address.
- Thirty-nine percent of adult detainees were either employed on a full or part-time basis, while 44 percent reported currently being unemployed.
- Twenty-one percent of the adult detainee population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- Twenty-six percent of adult detainees were charged with a violent offence as their most serious charge; 23 percent were charged with a property offence as their most serious charge.

why drug users first experiment with drugs has been largely overlooked. Knowing why an individual first uses drugs can provide a powerful insight into potential causal networks, as well as identify new options and approaches for intervention.

In recognition of this research gap, the AIC, through its DUMA program, developed a range of questions to further understand why drug-using detainees first experimented with illicit drugs. These new questions were included as an addendum to the DUMA questionnaire in the second quarter of 2009 (April–June). DUMA is Australia's longest running quarterly collection of self-reported drug use data from police detainees and currently operates at nine sites across the country, with eight sites actively collecting data in any given quarter on a rotating basis.

### About this study

In this study, results obtained from the drug use initiation addendum run as part of the AIC's DUMA program are examined. The addendum was designed to identify the factors considered by detainees as important in their decision to experiment (or not) with different drug types. In all, 842 alleged offenders who were detained and interviewed (but not yet convicted) were asked to recount the first time they used cannabis, amphetamines (henceforth referred to as *speed*) or illegal opiates (such as heroin, illegally obtained morphine or methadone). For those who continued to use one or more of these three substances, additional questions were then asked to identify the reasons why they had not ceased using, while those who had never used each of the three drugs were asked to nominate the reason for their decision to abstain. Data were collected during the second quarter of 2009 (April–June) at the following eight DUMA data collection sites—Bankstown, Parramatta, Brisbane, Southport, East Perth, Adelaide, Footscray and Darwin.

There are a number of limitations that should be considered when interpreting these results. In particular, it is important to note that DUMA is a

voluntary self-report survey of police detainees and as with all self-report surveys, the quality of the data hinges on the truthfulness and reliability of the respondents. Please see *Drug Use Monitoring in Australia: 2009–10 Annual Report on Drug Use among Police Detainees* (Sweeney & Payne 2012) for further methodological information about the DUMA program.

## Results

### Reasons for first using drugs

Approximately four of five detainees reported having experimented with cannabis (81%) in their lifetime, half had tried speed (55%) and just under than one-third had used an illegal opiate (32%). The three most frequently cited reasons for first experimenting with any illicit drug were:

- *curiosity*—wanting to see what it was like (70%);
- *peer pressure*—encouragement by friends or peers (57%); and
- *sensation seeking*—the desire to take a risk or try something exciting (21%).

Assessing each of the three illicit drugs separately, there was general consistency in the most common reasons given for first experimenting, although the prevalence of each reason varied. *Curiosity* for example, was more frequently cited as a reason for first using cannabis (71%) than it was for first use of speed (67%) or illegal opiates (56%). Similarly, *peer influence* was also more frequently associated with cannabis use (58%) than either speed (54%) or illegal opiates (40%). Conversely, *sensation seeking* was cited more often among speed users (26%) than either cannabis (20%) or illegal opiates users (19%).

Although not frequently identified as the reason for first trying illicit drugs, more than one in 10 detainees (11%) reported wanting to 'feel better' or 'stop feeling unhappy'. A further seven percent cited 'family problems', three percent cited 'work or school problems', three percent cited 'relationship problems' and as many as four percent of detainees cited a 'traumatic experience' as having played an important

**Table 1** Reasons for first trying substance (%)<sup>a</sup>

	Any illicit <sup>b</sup>	Cannabis	Speed	Illegal opiates	All illicit <sup>c</sup>
Friends used/was offered by a friend	57	58	54	40	69
Wanted to see what it was like	70	71	67	56	80
To feel better/to stop feeling unhappy	11	11	12	16	18
To take a risk/do something exciting	21	20	26	19	28
Family problems	7	6	5	10	10
Work/school problems	2	2	2	2	3
Relationship problems	3	2	4	7	6
Traumatic experience	4	3	3	10	7
(Coping) <sup>d</sup>	(17)	(16)	(17)	(30)	(27)
Other	8	8	11	18	8
(Total n)	(688)	(680)	(457)	(267)	(694)

a: Multiple responses permitted and therefore, totals do not sum to 100

b: 'Any illicit' refers to the reasons for trying the drug first used, regardless of which it was

c: 'All illicit' combines the reasons for those who used cannabis, speed and illegal opiates. Each reason was counted once only for each detainee, even if the same reason was given for more than one drug type

d: 'Coping' included the responses *family problems*, *work/school problems*, *relationship problems*, *traumatic experience* and *to feel better/to stop feeling unhappy* combined

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2009 [computer file]

part in their decision to first use illicit drugs. Combined together, these data suggested almost one in five (17%) detainees reported first using any illicit drug as a means of coping with emotional distress or other problems in their life.

For illegal opiates, situational, emotional or psychological issues were reported by almost one in three users (30%) as having influenced their decision to experiment. When all reported reasons are combined across all three drug types, the results indicated that as many as one in four (27%) drug users reported first using an illicit drug as a means for coping with issues in their life.

### Reasons for not using drugs

Detainees who had not tried one or more of the three substances were asked to nominate the reason for their decision to abstain (see Table 2). For cannabis, speed and illegal opiates, the number of detainees who had abstained was variable (19%, 55% and 68% respectively). Nevertheless, the main reason cited by detainees for not having tried each of the three drugs was that, at the time of interview, they had not yet been offered nor had an opportunity to use them. This was the case for 63 percent of those who had never tried cannabis, 73 percent of those who had never tried speed and 70 percent of those who had never tried illegal opiates. In all cases, the absence of 'opportunity' was among the most frequently cited reasons for never having tried illicit drugs.

For those who had abstained, despite having had the opportunity to use each drug, the reasons cited for not doing so were similar for each of the three drug types. For cannabis, the five reasons most commonly cited by detainees were:

- 'I was just not interested' (72%);
- 'I observed the effects of cannabis on other users' (28%);
- 'I'm concerned about health and dependency risks' (19%);
- 'I didn't think it would be enjoyable' (16%); and
- 'I had been educated about its negative effects' (12%).

For speed and illegal opiates, a similar pattern emerged with a few notable differences:

- Although a majority of detainees reported not being interested in trying speed (64%) or illegal opiates (61%) this was, nevertheless, proportionally lower than for cannabis. Perhaps by the time an individual was offered an opportunity to use these drugs, they were already using cannabis and therefore demonstrated an interest in illicit drug use more generally and were associating with other drug-using peers.
- As with cannabis, the observation of another person's use of speed (35%) and illegal opiates (50%) rated highly as a reason for deciding not to use both drugs. However, this was most frequently cited by detainees as a reason for not using illegal opiates.

<b>Table 2</b> Reasons for not trying a particular substance (%) <sup>a</sup>				
	Any illicit	Cannabis	Speed	Illegal opiates
<b>Of those who had not yet used...</b>				
Have not yet been offered or had an opportunity to use		63	73	70
Had an opportunity to use but chose not to		37	26	30
Total (n)		(153)	(370)	(560)
<b>Of those who had an opportunity to use, but did not...</b>				
Just not interested	65	72	64	61
Health or dependency reasons	21	19	21	19
Didn't like to feel out of control	15	4	15	17
Fear of legal consequences	4	5	6	2
Didn't think it would be enjoyable	21	16	22	19
Religious/moral reasons	5	9	8	4
Pressure from family/friends	4	9	4	3
Financial reasons	2	2	1	2
Education or awareness	17	12	19	18
Observed someone else under the effect of the substance	45	28	35	50
Other	9	7	7	8
(Total n)	(260)	(57)	(100)	(171)

a: Multiple responses permitted and therefore totals do not sum to 100

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2009 [computer file]

- Concerns about health and dependency featured in the top five reasons for not using both speed and illegal opiates, but was marginally higher for speed (21%) than illegal opiates (19%).
- Speed was the drug for which the largest proportion of detainees (22%) said that they did not use the drug because they didn't think it would be enjoyable.
- Education and awareness featured more prominently as reasons for not using speed (19%) and illegal opiates (18%) than cannabis (12%);

Although not as frequently reported by detainees, there were a number of other reasons given for choosing to abstain from drugs. These included:

- Concerns about being 'out of control' featured more prominently as reasons for not using illegal opiates (17%) and speed (15%) than cannabis (4%).
- Religious or moral reasons were not frequently cited by abstainers of either cannabis (9%) or speed (8%); however, it was interesting to note that moral or religious reasons were much less likely to be cited for abstaining from illegal opiates (4%).
- The fear of legal consequences was also not frequently cited by abstainers of either cannabis (5%) or speed (6%), but was even less frequently cited by those who had chosen to abstain from illegal opiates (2%).
- The financial cost of drugs did not feature highly as a reason for abstaining from cannabis (2%), speed (1%) or illegal opiates (2%).

### Reasons for continuing to use drugs

Of those detainees who had tried at least one of the three illicit drugs, a supplementary set of questions were asked to identify the reasons for continued use (see Table 3). Similar levels of continued use were reported across the three illicit drugs, with those who had tried cannabis (58%) or speed (57%) having the highest levels of continued use, followed by the continued use of illegal opiates (50%).

Overall, users of illicit drugs provided a number of reasons for continuing to use, with the main reason for continued use being to relax (43%). However, this varies greatly depending on drug type, with cannabis users (38%) being twice as likely as users of illegal opiates (19%) and nearly five times (8%) as likely as speed users to still use for relaxation. Continued use for enjoyment (40%) was the second most common reason cited and was generally consistent across each of the three illicit drug categories.

More than one in four detainees (26%) still using illicit drugs said socialising with others was an important reason for continuing to use. Cannabis (19%) and speed users (16%) were more than twice as likely as illegal opiate users (6%) to nominate socialising as an important reason. In addition, the continued use of illicit drugs as a means of feeling better or to coping with life issues was reported by as many as one in four detainees (26%), although this was higher for users of illegal opiates (22%) compared with users of cannabis (15%) and speed (12%). Finally, one in four detainees

	Any illicit	Cannabis	Illegal opiates	Speed
I am addicted/dependent	24	12	22	8
I enjoy using [DRUG]/like the effects	40	27	23	23
To feel better/cope with life	26	15	22	12
To relax	43	38	19	8
I use when socialising with others	26	19	6	16
Do not use substance anymore	67	42	50	57
Other	12	7	19	11
(Total n)	(691)	(680)	(267)	(455)

a: Multiple responses permitted and therefore totals do not sum to 100

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2009 [computer file]

(24%) nominated an addiction or dependency on illicit drugs as the reason why they still continue to use the drug; although this varies according to drug type. Users of illegal opiates (22%), for example, were the most likely to nominate addiction or dependency, followed by users of cannabis (12%) and speed (8%).

## Discussion

Early intervention is viewed in Australia as a critical tool for achieving a reduction in the demand for illicit drugs and demand reduction remains one of the three key pillars of the Australian National Illicit Drug Strategy. To intervene early and effectively requires programs that prevent (or delay) the first use of illicit drugs, or those that minimise the probability of continued use. These programs will be most effective when informed by ongoing research that identifies the circumstances and situations in which drug use initiation occurs, as well as the factors that precipitate longer term use.

This paper presents unique data collected in 2009 from a large sample 842 police detainees, the vast majority of whom had experimented with illicit drugs. For these detainees, the two most frequently recorded reasons for experimenting with drugs was peer pressure or personal curiosity—a finding that is generally consistent for cannabis, speed and illegal opiates, and similar to the results of other surveys of drug users (eg AIHW 2011).

Perhaps the most important result from these data was not that peer pressure and personal curiosity were cited most frequently by detainees, but that, in addition to these reasons, a substantial proportion also reported first experimenting with (27%) or continuing to use (26%) illicit drugs as a result of a need to cope with life problems or issues, such as mental health problems, family or relationship breakdowns, or schooling or employment problems. For these detainees, drugs were seen as a means of coping with the difficulties of their personal situation (eg see Khantzian 1997).

The goal for early intervention policies and programs are, therefore, twofold. First, is to correct the misperception that illicit drugs are a safe means of self-medication, whether for mental health, pain management, or other personal concerns. In this regard, education about short and long-term consequences of illicit drug use, as well as alternatives to drug use, will likely play an important role. Second, is to ensure that sufficient resources exist to support a range of alternative treatment and counselling options, in particular for young people at risk and who experience physical health, trauma or psychological problems. Increasing services and raising awareness about alternative treatment and counselling options will help to reduce the likelihood that individuals will perceive using illicit drugs as a viable means of coping in difficult situations.

With regards to those detainees who had abstained from drug use, few reported concern about the financial cost of drug use (2% across all drug types) or the legal consequences (4%). This is considerably lower than is reported by abstainers in the general population (6.7% and 28.6% respectively; AIHW 2011), but perhaps not surprising since this is a sample of police detainees who are likely to be less law abiding across a range of activities. Nevertheless, these data indicated that efforts to educate young people about both the legal and financial costs of drug use alone may be relatively ineffective for preventing experimentation or escalation to more frequent and serious use. Moreover, while one in five abstainers (21%) reported concerns about the health effects of drug use, this is surprisingly low considering that health consequences were nominated by almost half of the abstainers in the general population (47%; AIHW 2011). While this might indicate that health concerns are unimportant, even to the majority of detainees who willingly abstain from drugs, alternatively, it might suggest that detailed knowledge of the short and long-term health consequences of drug use are not well known and are therefore not considered when an opportunity to first try drugs is presented.



Finally, almost half of those who had abstained from drugs (45%) did so after having seen the negative consequences of intoxication on other users, while 15 percent were concerned about losing personal control. These factors reflect concerns about the immediate, rather than the long-term effects of drug use. To the extent that these reasons relate to personal health, the data suggested that short-term health consequences appear more influential in decision making than consideration of long-term health consequences. A multifaceted education and awareness approach that focuses on these short-term concerns, alongside the promotion of negative long-term health consequences, is likely assist in either delaying or preventing drug use initiation and the potential escalation to more frequent and serious use.

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URLs correct at August 2012

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## What is DUMA?

*DUMA is Australia's only nationwide survey of drug use and criminal offending among police detainees. Funded by the Australian Government, DUMA uses a detailed self-report survey and voluntary urinalysis to provide timely data on drug use and local drug markets. DUMA is an important source of information for local and national law enforcement agencies in the development of strategic responses to new and emerging drug/crime issues.*

*DUMA data collection occurs every quarter at eight sites across the country. The program operates as a successful partnership between the Australian Institute of Criminology and state and territory police agencies.*

*For more information about DUMA, or to access DUMA data and publications, please visit: [http://www.aic.gov.au/about\\_aic/research\\_programs/nmp/duma.aspx](http://www.aic.gov.au/about_aic/research_programs/nmp/duma.aspx) or email us at: [duma@aic.gov.au](mailto:duma@aic.gov.au)*