Research Bulletin



Drug-related patterns and trends in NSW inmates Summary of the 2005-06 biennial data collection

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Drug misuse presents a major challenge for correctional management practice. The extent and variety of drug use by offenders is far greater than in the general population and is commonly linked to the commission of criminal activity. The current findings were obtained from the fourth survey in a biennial data collection series on New South Wales (NSW) inmates about to be discharged to freedom in 2005-06. The purpose of the research was to monitor patterns and trends on a range of drug-related indicators. These included drug-related crime, drug use prior to and during imprisonment and the reach of both prison-based treatment services and drug enforcement measures. This comprehensive data set provides a research base for developing and improving preventative, treatment and security mechanisms in this key criminogenic area of drug misuse. The first report in the series used a sample drawn in 1998. Due to the importance of this information, the survey now forms part of the Department of Corrective Services' (NSW DCS) regular collections. As the prevalence rates from the prior data collections in this series ^{2,3,4} are relatively constant and consistent with other studies on prison populations, the drug-related indicators from this data collection should be regarded as robust and reliable. The series is listed as one of the global illicit drug indicator data sets in NSW¹.

KEY FINDINGS

Drug-related offending

65% of males and 73% of females reported that at least one of their current offences was related to their use of alcohol and/or other drugs.

Drug use

In the six months prior to their current prison term, more than three-quarters of both males (79%) and females (84%) reported illicit drug use while in the community. Pre-prison use of 'heavy-end' drugs (i.e. heroin, amphetamines or cocaine) was reported by 56% of males and 66% of females.

Drug problem profile

About three-quarters of both male inmates and female inmates reported a drug problem history. Almost half the males (43%) and two in three females (68%) reported experiencing drug withdrawal syndrome on reception to full-time custody for their current prison term.

Participation in prison drug treatment and health promotion programs

Almost one in two males (48%) and two in three females (64%) participated in drug treatment programs (non-pharmachotherapeutic interventions, e.g. counselling or structured group) during their current prison term. Two in three males (64%) and three in four females (75%) reported receiving health promotion information during their current prison term.

Exposure to prison drug screening and detection measures

Two in three males (66%) and nine in ten (93%) females had either been tested by urinalysis or searched by drug detector dogs during their current prison term. From the range of contraband detection measures surveyed, urinalysis was rated as having the greatest drug deterrence effect.

METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this replication research study was to obtain data on drug-related offending and patterns of drug use of NSW inmates prior to and while serving a custodial sentence. A supplementary aim was to provide a greater understanding of the social context of drug use within the correctional setting. Uptake of treatment services and exposure to drug screening and detection measures were also examined.

A stratified random sample design was used for male inmates to ensure an adequate representation of the inmate discharge population. As females comprised just 7% of the sentenced population, all females discharged within the study's time-frame were included to allow for larger numbers and more meaningful findings. The data were collected around the State by way of personal interview using a structured questionnaire during late 2005 and early 2006. Participation was voluntary. The achieved sample consisted of 344 full-time inmates (300 males and 44 females) serving a sentence of at least one month who were shortly to be discharged to freedom. The sample captured more than one-quarter of the actual discharge population. A very low refusal rate of 4% was recorded for this study.

RESULTS

1. Demographic and criminal profile

The background characteristics and criminal history of the 300 male inmates and 44 female inmates are detailed in Table 1. While males and females matched on a number of demographic factors, discernible differences were noted on the following factors; indigenous background (17.4% versus 34.1%), sentence history as an adult (68.7% versus 56.8%), metropolitan place of residence prior to current prison term (49.7% versus 60.5%) and employment prior to current prison term (44.7% versus 18.2%).

2. Drug-related crime

In 2005-06, 65.2% of male inmates and 72.7% of female inmates reported that at least one of the offences for which they were currently imprisoned was related to their use of alcohol and/or other drugs (Figures 1 and 2). The rate of drug-related offending was lower for males, yet higher for females when compared with 2003-04 rates (71.3% and 66.7% respectively). The increased proportion of females reporting drug-related offences in 2005-06 also corresponds with a rise in the proportion of females imprisoned in NSW at this time⁵.

	Male inmates	Female inmates
🖙 Australian born	81.3%	79.5%
☞ Age (median)*	31 years	32 years
Australian Indigenous background	17.4%	34.1%
Number of years at school (average)	9.3 years	9.3 years
English usually spoken at home	89.9%	100.0%
Resided within Sydney prior to current term	49.7%	60.5%
Employed prior to current term	44.7%	18.2%
Prior prison sentence term as an adult	68.7%	56.8%
Prior detention as a juvenile	32.3%	15.9%

Table 1: Demographic and criminal profile [Base = total sample n=344]

*Age range: males (18 to 74 years); females (20 to 60 years)

The nature of the drug-crime relationship was more closely examined through the identification of the type of drug or drugs involved in the commission of the Most Serious Offence (main offence). For males, the drugs most commonly linked to their main offence were alcohol (50.3%), heroin (30.5%) and amphetamines (29.9%) (Table 2). For females, heroin (54.8%) and alcohol (29.0%) were the drugs most commonly linked to their main offence. Of those with a drug-related main offence, 49.7% of males and 45.2% of females identified more than one type of drug as being involved with that offence.

Self reported drug-related offences [Base=total sample]

Figure 1: Male inmates*



Figure 2: Female inmates



* 1 missing case

Table 2: Type of drugs linked to Most Serious Offence

	Male inmates (n=177)	Female inmates (n=31)	Total (n=208)
	%	%	%
Alcohol	50.3	29.0	47.1
Heroin	30.5	54.8	34.1
Amphetamines	29.9	12.9	27.4
Cannabis	27.1	22.6	26.4
Pills*	16.4	19.4	16.8
Cocaine	10.7	12.9	11.1
Methadone	6.8	6.5	6.7
Ecstasy	6.8	0	5.8
Other opiates	1.1	0	1.0
Hallucinogens	0.6	0	0.5

(Base = those with a drug-related Most Serious Offence [n=208])

Multiple responses as a percentage of total cases; *pills= Benzodiazepines/sedatives

3. Patterns of drug use

Patterns of drug use both in the six months prior to and during the current prison term are shown for male and females separately (Tables 3 and 4).

The last occasion of use of a particular drug, both in the community and in prison is presented as the median number of days that has elapsed since last use (i.e. firstly, prior to reception to prison and secondly, prior to the interview in prison). Overall, 79.0% of males reported that they used an illicit drug and 56.0% used a 'heavy-end' illicit drug (heroin, cocaine or amphetamines) prior to their current prison term (Table 3). The most commonly used drugs (excluding tobacco) by males prior to prison were alcohol (70.7%), cannabis (58.3%), amphetamines (39.3%) and heroin (31.3%) in In 2005-06, there were slightly that order. higher rates of pre-prison alcohol (70.7%) and ecstasy (20.3%) use reported by males when compared with 2003-04 rates (63.8% and 15.8% respectively). Pre-prison cannabis use by males appeared to decline significantly between 2003-04 and 2005-06 (70.2% versus 58.3%).

Most females reported illicit drug use (84.1%) and 'heavy-end' illicit drug use (65.9%) prior to their current prison term (Table 4). The most commonly used drugs by females prior to prison were cannabis (63.6%), heroin (50.0%), alcohol (50.0%) and pills (47.7%). In 2005-06, there was a much lower rate of amphetamine use (27.3%) and a higher a rate of pill use (47.7%) reported by females when compared with 2003-04 rates (42.9% and 38.1% respectively). Overall, pre-prison illicit drug use by females showed an increase in 2005-06 when compared with the rate reported in 2003-04.

Half of the inmates surveyed (both males and females) reported that they had used illicit drugs at least once during their current prison term. By a large margin, this was accounted for by cannabis use (46.3% of males and 40.9% of females).

Pre-prison injecting drug use was reported by 44.0% of males and 61.4% of females. Inprison injecting drug use was reported by 10.7% of males and 20.5% of females. Of the males and females who reported injecting drugs in prison, 63.4% shared injecting equipment on their last occasion of injecting drugs and of this group all cleaned their injecting equipment.

With the exception of cannabis, generally the prevalence of pre-prison illicit drug use by males remained relatively stable between 2003-04 and 2005-06. Yet, prevalence rates for inprison drug use and injecting drug use by males showed a marked decline between 2003-04 and 2005-06 (63.0% versus 50.7% and 17.0% versus 10.7% respectively). The prevalence of pre-prison illicit drug use by females increased between 2003-04 and 2005-06. While in-prison illicit drug use by females remained at the 2003-04 rate (50.0%).

Consistent with prior data collections in this series, last occasion of drug use data indicated that the frequency of drug use declined sharply with imprisonment. Table 3: 2005-06 patterns of drug use by male inmates: six months before prison and during current prison term (Base = total male sample [n=300])

Drug	Community	Prison [#]	Last occasion of use before entry to	Last occasion of use in prison and before
	%	%	prison [median no. days]	interview [median no. days]
Tobacco	82.6	89.3	0	0*2
Alcohol	70.7	4.7	0*3	120*2
Cannabis	58.3	46.3	1*1	14
Amphetamines	39.3	6.7	1	90
Heroin	31.3	12.0	1	90
Pills	21.7	9.3	1	22
Ecstasy	20.3	2.3	14	-
Cocaine	18.0	3.0	7	-
Illicit methadone	7.0	0.7	7	-
Medication*	3.3	9.3	-	36
Hallucinogens	2.3	0.7	-	-
Steroids	1.3	1.0	-	-
Illicit buprenorphine	1.3	7.3	-	60
Inhalants/solvents	0.3	0.7	-	
Kava	0.3	0	-	-
Any illicit ^{*1} drug use	79.0	50.7		
Illicit drug use – heavy-end (heroin, amphetamines or cocaine)	50.0	45 7		
	56.0	15.7		
Injecting drug use	44.0	10.7		

Note: Due to small numbers, medians are not reported for those drugs which were used by less than 5% of the sample;

*median term of imprisonment = 6 months * medication not prescribed for self; *¹drug use (excluding alcohol and tobacco)
 *² 1 missing case; *³ 2 missing cases.

Table 4: 2005-06 patterns of drug use by female inmates: six months before prison and during current prison term (Base = total female sample [n=44])

Drug	Community %	Prison [#] %	Last occasion of use before entry to prison [median no. days]	Last occasion of use in prison and before interview [median no. days]
Tobacco	88.6	88.6	0*2	0*2
Cannabis	63.6	40.9	1	14
Alcohol	50.0	6.8	2	395
Heroin	50.0	15.9	1	60
Pills	47.7	20.5	0	30
Amphetamines	27.3	13.6	4	75
Cocaine	20.5	2.3	2	-
Ecstasy	2.3	2.3	-	-
Illicit methadone	13.6	6.8	11	485
Medication*	2.3	2.3	-	-
Hallucinogens	0	2.3	-	-
Steroids	0	0	-	-
Illicit buprenorphine	0	4.5	-	60
Inhalants/solvents	0	0	-	-
Kava	0	0	-	-
Any illicit ^{*1} drug use	84.1	50.0		
Illicit drug use – heavy-end (heroin, amphetamines or cocaine)	65.9	20.5		
Injecting drug use	61.4	20.5		

Note: Due to small numbers, medians are not reported for those drugs which were used by less than 5% of the sample; m^{*} median term of imprisonment = 6 months * medication not prescribed for self; *¹drug use (excluding alcohol and tobacco) *² missing case

4. Drug treatment profile

Over two in five males (43.3%) reported that they were withdrawing from drugs (including alcohol) on reception for their current prison term (Figure 3). Three-quarters of males (74.3%) reported having had a drug problem at some stage in their lives. For these males, the median age at which their problem developed was 17 years (range: 7 to 53). Of those with a problem history, 41.4% rated their problem as serious in the six months prior to their current prison term (Figure 5). This represents 30.7% of the total male sample. Almost all of those with a problem history (97.7%) reported abstaining from their main problem drug at some stage. The majority of this group (76.0%) reported that they had periods of abstinence while in the community and while in prison. A further 22.6% reported abstaining only while in prison and 1.4% reported abstaining only while in the community. A large majority of males with a problem history (90.6%) had received drug treatment (counselling, structured groups or residential programs) at some stage. A breakdown of drug treatment history by location (community or prison) is provided in Table 5. Of the total male sample, (33.9%) had received methadone maintenance treatment and 14.4% received buprenorphine maintenance had treatment at some stage in the past.

Two in three females (68.2%) reported that they were withdrawing from drugs (including alcohol)

on reception for their current prison term (Figure 4). This is considerably higher than the occurrence rate recorded in 2003-04 (47.6%). A large majority of females (81.8%) reported having had a drug problem at some stage in their lives. For these females, the median age at which their problem developed was 17 years (range: 12 to 36). More than half of the females (58.3%) with a problem history rated their problem as serious in the six months prior to their current prison term (Figure 5). This represents 47.7% of the total female sample. All of those with a problem history reported abstaining from their main problem drug at some stage. Of this group, a large majority (83.3%) reported that they had periods of abstinence while in the community and while in prison. A further 16.7% reported abstaining only while in prison. Almost all females (94.4%) with a problem history had participated in drug treatment programs (counselling, structured groups or residential programs) in the past (Table 5). More than half of the total female sample (56.8%) reported having received methadone maintenance treatment and 29.5% received buprenorphine maintenance had treatment at some stage in the past.

In some cases prison had provided the only treatment experience for those with drug-related problems, as 23.3% of males and 27.8% of females reported that they had participated in counselling or structured groups only while in prison.

Figure 4: Female inmates



Experience of drug withdrawal syndrome on reception (Base = total sample [n=344])

Figure 3: Male inmates

Figure 5: Perceived drug problem severity in the six months prior to current prison term (Base = inmates who reported having had a drug problem history [n=259])



 Table 5: Inmate drug treatment history (counselling, structured groups or residential programs) (Base = inmates with a drug problem history who participated prior drug treatment [n=236])

Treatment location	Male inmates (n=202*) %	Female inmates (n=34) %	Total (n=236) %
Community only	25.2	17.6	24.2
Prison only	25.7	29.4	26.3
Both	49.0	52.9	49.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

* I missing case

5. Participation in drug and health promotion programs in current prison term

Of male inmates, 47.7% used the Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Services (non-medical drug treatment program) in the NSW correctional system on at least one occasion during their current prison term. Just over half (53.1%) of those males who were experiencing drug withdrawal syndrome on entry to prison went on to use the AOD Services. More than half (63.6%) of the female inmates had used the AOD Services. Almost three quarters (73.3%) of those females who were experiencing drug withdrawal syndrome on entry to prison went on to use the Services.

Table 6 shows a breakdown of the type of service received. For both males and females, the most commonly received treatment was one-to-one counselling (79.0% and 82.1%, respectively).

A number of health promotion programs and products are provided to inmates, including structured group programs, peer support training and information booklets. The primary focus of these strategies is education and prevention in the areas of HIV and hepatitis C (HCV) infection. In terms of the reach of health promotion, 64.3% of males and 75.0% of females reported that they received at least one of these forms of education during their current prison term. Table 7 shows a cross-section of different types of health promotion the strategies received. For those who received education, the Health Promotion Diary (83.2%) was the most commonly received resource. In relation to other education strategies, inmates most commonly participated in a HIV/HepC Awareness Program (34.1%) or Health Promotion Workshop (32.3%). Only 11.1% of inmates had participated in a Peer Educator Program.

•	Table 6: Type of contact with prison-based AOD Services during current term
((Base = those who used the Alcohol and Other Drugs Services: [n=171])

Type of treatment	Male inmates (n=143) %	Female inmates (n=28) %	Total (n=171) %
One-to-one counselling	79.0	82.1	79.5
Standardised group program	58.7	35.7	55.0
Self-help group (NA/AA)	26.6	60.7	32.2
Residential program	16.8	28.6	18.7
Report interview/s (court, parole)	28.7	21.4	27.5

[Set=multiple responses as % of cases - hence does not total 100.0%]

Table 7: Type of health promotion strategy received

(Base=those inmates who received health promotion information: [n=226])

Type of strategy	Male inmates (n=193) %	Female inmates (n=33) %	Total (n=226) %
Health Promotion Diary	85.5	69.7	83.2
HIV/HepC Awareness Program	32.1	45.5	34.1
Health Promotion Workshop	31.6	36.4	32.3
Peer Educator Program	10.9	12.1	11.1

[Set=multiple responses as % of cases - hence does not total 100.0%]

6. Drug screening and detection – exposure and perceptions

Correctional management employs a range of drug screening and detection measures to reduce the supply and use of drugs within the NSW correctional system. Urinalysis, drug detector dogs, cell searches and 'pat-down' searches (body searches) are the most common. Urinalysis and drug detector dogs are drug-dedicated procedures. Cell searches and 'pat-downs' are also used in the detection of general contraband, such as weapons. To gauge the level of exposure, inmates were asked how often they had personally experienced these measures during their current prison term. Both male and female inmates most commonly experienced cell searches and 'pat-downs' (Table 8). This is not surprising as cell searches and 'pat-downs' are comparatively simple, low-cost procedures which target large numbers of inmates in searching for contraband in general. Almost one in two males (48.3%) and more than four in five females (83.3%) reported that they had a

urinalysis test at least once during their current prison term (Table 8). Further, more than one in two males (56.4%) and three in four females (78.6%) reported being searched by a drug detector dog at least once during their current prison term. When compared with male inmates, female inmates reportedly experienced a higher rate of exposure to measures that specifically targeted illicit drugs. These differences between male and female inmates in rate of exposure were possibly due to the conditions attached to special programs. For example, regular urinalysis testing is required for pharmacotherapy and other programs and females reported a higher rate of participation in these treatment regimes. The perceived impact of the various drug screening and detection measures on reducing illicit drugs in prison is shown in Table 9. Urinalysis was rated as having the highest impact (medium to high rating) by both males (72.7%) and females (86.0%). After urinalysis, drug detector dogs were rated as having the highest impact (63.8% of males and 58.1% of females).

Table 8: Exposure to drug screening and detection measures during current prison term	
(Base = total sample [n = 344])	

Type of measure	Male inmates (n=298*) %	Female inmates (n=43* ¹) %	Total (n=341) %
Cell searches	91.6	92.9	91.8
Pat-down searches	88.6	100.0	90.0
Drug detector dogs	56.4	78.6	59.1
Urinalysis	48.3	83.3	52.6

* 2 missing cases ^{*1} missing case

Table 9: Perceived impact of drug screening and detection measures during current prison term $(Base = total \ sample \ [n = 344])$

Type of measure	Male inmates (n=290*) %		Fe	emale inmate (n=43 ^{*1}) %	es	
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Cell searches	39.0	40.0	21.0	41.9	37.2	20.9
Pat-down searches	56.9	32.4	10.7	53.5	25.6	20.9
Drug detector dogs	36.2	39.0	24.8	41.9	37.2	20.9
Urinalysis	27.2	28.6	44.1	14.0	58.1	27.9

* 10 missing cases ^{*1} 1 missing case

7. Inmate social code on drug use

Prison-based drug use occurs within a social context. The survey series sought to gather data on inmate perceptions around the social code among inmates that applies to drug use in prison. It was intended that these findings would improve understanding of the culture of drug use in prison and gauge inmate awareness of drug harm reduction messages.

Inmates were asked to describe the rules 'among inmates' that apply to using drugs in prison. Up to four possible open-ended answers were recorded and most inmates (89.2%) responded to these questions. Half of these inmates (49.2%) provided at least three rules associated with using drugs in prison. Responses were widely spread. However, the rules put forward by male inmates and female inmates were comparable. Themes which featured prominently were; 'avoid drug use', 'avoid financial debts' and 'clean injecting equipment' (Table 10). Also, females commonly nominated 'don't promise to supply drugs for others' (25.0%) as a rule. These themes corresponded with those recorded in prior data collections. Across data collections, the salient theme that has emerged is that drug use in prison is perceived by inmates as a potentially high risk and harmful activity.

Drug rule	Male inmates* (n=271) %	Female inmates ^{* 1} (n=36) %	Total (n=307) %
Don't use drugs	47.6	47.2	47.6
Don't obtain drugs on credit	42.4	22.2	40.1
Don't share needles	34.7	50.0	36.5
Use clean syringes and needles	20.7	27.8	21.5

Table 10: Inmate social code on drugs: most frequently cited rules (Base = total sample [n = 344])

* 29 missing cases ^{*1} 8 missing cases

IMPLICATIONS

This research bulletin presents summary drug statistics derived from interviews with sentenced inmates about to be released to freedom in NSW in 2005-06. In comparison with prior years, the drug indicators from 2005-06 show a downward trend in the drug-related offending and in-prison drug use of male inmates and an upward trend in participation in prison drug treatment programs. There has been a disproportionate rise in the female inmate population in NSW in recent years. In 2005-06. female inmates also showed an upward trend in rates of drug-related offending, pre-prison drug use and the experience of drug withdrawal syndrome on reception to prison. This was not matched by an upward trend in the rate of in-prison drug use by female inmates which remained stable between 2003-04 and 2005-06.

The indicators provide a broad measure of the reach, balance and impact of the drug demand reduction, harm reduction and supply reduction programs implemented by NSW DCS. Furthermore, NSW DCS has a range of enhanced programs that are accountable over time to external funding sources, such as the NSW Drug Summit.

In terms of program reach alone the findings are considered positive. The majority of inmates were found to have participated in drug treatment, received health promotion information and personally experienced drug interdiction measures during their current prison term. The drug problem indicators pertaining to male inmates were generally encouraging with a number of indicators showing decreases relative to 2003-04.

A possible preliminary marker of an upward trend in drug-related morbidity among female inmates was evident.

While some encouraging patterns and trends are reported, drug morbidity remains widespread in the NSW inmate population, confirming that this area should remain a priority for NSW DCS. Based on current findings, drug programs for female inmates should be strengthened.

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