

Know C-19 Drug Use Impacts Bulletin No. 2

Impact of COVID-19 on people who use methamphetamine in Victoria: first/preliminary analyses

Background

The Australian response to COVID-19 is unprecedented in modern times. Changes to border controls, regulations around physical distancing and prohibitions on public gatherings are anticipated to have profound impacts on drug markets and people who use drugs¹. In partnership with the Monash University School of Rural Health, the Burnet Institute runs the VMAX study, a prospective cohort study of people who use methamphetamine in Melbourne and regional Victoria. This study provides a unique opportunity to compare information from participants collected before, during and after the COVID-19 restrictions to examine their impacts on people who use methamphetamine across the state. We have also modified our questionnaires to collect additional information specific to COVID-19 restrictions. This Bulletin continues a series in which we present findings from analyses of all our studies of people who use drugs that will be monitored and updated as COVID-19 restrictions evolve.

Methods

The VMAX Team conducted 145 interviews with VMAX participants between March 30 (the date we started using the modified questionnaire) and Jun19 2020. Below, we present findings from COVID-19-specific questions and comparisons between data from these 145 interviews and 144 interviews conducted with different participants over the period Dec19-Feb 2020 (before COVID-19 restrictions). These initial cross-sectional analyses will be supplemented by longitudinal analyses examining how COVID-19 has impacted participants at an individual level over time in later Bulletins.

Initial findings

Social impacts of COVID-19 restrictions to date

- Weekly incomes reported by participants were significantly higher after the COVID-19 restrictions, with 66% of those interviewed after March 30 reporting an income of \$400 or greater compared to 40% of those interviewed Dec-19-Mar20.
- No statistically significant changes in accommodation or living circumstances were noted.

Drug Use Impacts

75% of the total sample (n=289) reported methamphetamine use since their last interview

- Of these participants, 50% of those interviewed after March 30 (n=145) reported methamphetamine use in the past month, a small increase from those interviewed pre-COVID-19 (43%, n=144).
- Very few participants reported shifting to using illicit drugs other than methamphetamine as a direct result of COVID-19 restrictions. Only a small number reported changing their alcohol consumption as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (10% of the total sample), but of these 69% reported that their alcohol consumption had increased.

Drug Purchasing and Spending Impacts

Methamphetamine:

- Twenty-seven participants reported wanting to purchase methamphetamine but were unable to after 30 March, 56% of these participants indicated that their dealer said there was none available.
- Prices paid for methamphetamine increased significantly, from an estimated \$312 per gram pre-COVID-19 to \$405 per gram after 29 March.
- 33% of those who purchased methamphetamine after March 30 believed the purity was weaker than normal. In contrast 23% believed the purity was greater than normal.

Other drugs:

- The average weekly amount spent on other drugs in the past month increased significantly from \$21 per week before COVID-19 to \$63 per week after COVID-19.

¹ 1. Dietze, P. & Peacock, A. (2020). Illicit drug use and harms in Australia in the context of COVID-19 and associated restrictions: anticipated consequences and initial responses. *Drug Alcohol Rev.*

- The average weekly amount spent on alcohol in the past month increased significantly from \$8 per week before COVID-19 to \$29 per week after COVID-19.
- The increase in the average weekly amount spent on tobacco in the past month, from \$45 per week before COVID-19 to \$59 per week after COVID-19, was not statistically significant.

Depression and Anxiety

A range of validated scales are used to assess the Mental Health of VMAX participants, with depression and anxiety commonly reported.

- The percentage of participants classified as experiencing depression (mild, moderate or severe) using the PHQ-9 did not change significantly after March 30 (75% versus 72% for those interviewed Dec19-Mar20).
- The percentage of participants classified as experiencing anxiety (mild, moderate or severe) using the GAD-7 was slightly lower after March 30 (62%) compared to those interviewed Dec19-Mar20 (70%), but this difference was not statistically significant.

Dependence and Treatment Impacts

Dependence:

- Severity of methamphetamine dependence in VMAX is measured using the Severity of Dependence Scale (SDS): the percentage of participants classified as dependent using this scale was slightly lower after March 30 (36%) compared to those interviewed Dec19-Mar20 (42%), but this difference was not statistically significant.

Treatment:

- There was a non-significant decline in the number of participants reporting currently accessing individual drug counselling (8%) after March 30 compared to those interviewed Dec-19-Mar20 (12%).
- A slightly smaller percentage of participants reported trying to access treatment but were unable to after March 30 (10%) compared to those interviewed Dec19-Mar20 (14%), but this difference was not statistically significant.

Overall Impressions

- A slight majority of participants reported that there had been little impact of COVID-19 restrictions on their use or purchase of methamphetamine; those who did report an impact (20%) generally indicated that price had gone up and/or the drug had become more difficult to obtain.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of VMAX data shows some significant shifts in the methamphetamine market after COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. The prices reported as being paid for methamphetamine appeared to increase and a substantial minority of participants reported that they had trouble sourcing methamphetamine. Use of, and expenditure on, alcohol increased and participants interviewed after the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced had higher incomes. There was no evidence of any differences in methamphetamine treatment utilisation or of any differences in problems accessing methamphetamine treatment after COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. These changes in the methamphetamine market require careful monitoring over time.

IMPLICATIONS

- Further monitoring is needed to assess the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the cohort, particularly in relation to the impact of potential changes in illicit drug markets/supply and drug purchasing pattern

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