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# Recorded drug use and possession offences and offenders, 2005 – 2014

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The number of recorded drug use and possession offences in Victoria has continued to increase over the past five years, while other evidence suggests that the number of people using drugs has remained stable. This exploratory study analysed trends in both the number and rate of drug use and possession offences and offenders over the past ten years, as well as the characteristics of these offenders. The research found that the rate of offences has continued to rise since 2010. The rate of offenders has also risen, but to a lesser extent. Over the past two years, the increase in both the offence and offender rates has slowed. Seventy two percent of recorded drug use and possession offenders were only recorded for one use and possession offence incident between 2005 and 2014. The majority of recorded offenders were male (81.4%) and aged under 30 at the time of their first recorded offence in the dataset (62.7%). Further research will be conducted to examine whether the observed increases over past five years were driven by offending in particular geographic regions or by offences relating to particular drug types.

*Keywords: trends, drug use and possession, recorded crime, repeat offending, offender characteristics.*

Introduction

The Crime Statistics Agency’s (CSA’s) March 2015 quarterly statistical release reported that along with some other offence categories, the rate of drug offences in Victoria has continued to rise over the past five years. The rise in drug offences was largely due to an increase in the rate of drug use and possession offences, which increased from 196.1 offences per 100,000 population in the year ending March 2011 to 345.9 offences per 100,000 population in the year ending March 2015 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2015a).

Recorded crime statistics, including drug use and possession statistics, only comprise offences that come to the attention of and are recorded by police. Further, police officers inevitably apply discretion to determine both whether to record a crime and what to record it as (Burrows, Tarling and Mackie, 2000; Ombudsman Victoria, 2009). Changes in recorded crime statistics over time therefore, may or may not reflect similar underlying changes in the actual incidence of crimes committed or in the overall prevalence of drug use. This means that the observed increase in the number of drug use and possession offences in Victoria cannot be interpreted as conclusive proof that the prevalence of people using or possessing drugs has increased.

Data from different sources can provide context for interpreting recorded crime statistics. The most recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey, the only major survey that examines population level illicit drug use across Australia, found that there was no significant change in the proportion of Victorians who said they had used illicit drugs in the past 12 months between the 2010 and the 2013 surveys. Further, the survey results show there has been very little change in overall prevalence of drug use over the past decade (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014a). This suggests that the increase in recorded drug offences in Victoria is not due to an increase in the prevalence of people using drugs. Instead it may reflect increased detection of offences by police, or increased frequency of offending amongst a discrete group of people who use drugs and come to the attention of police.

Analysis of recorded crime data can usefully contribute to a number of policy and practice issues. For example, it can be used to develop knowledge about the characteristics of drug use and possession offenders, which is vital to ensure that prevention strategies and treatment services are evidence-based and appropriately targeted. Law enforcement data is of particular relevance in this area given that criminal justice diversion responses, where offenders are diverted away from the criminal justice system into drug and alcohol treatment, make up a considerable share of all drug and alcohol treatment clients in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014b).

**Aims**

This paper is the first in a series of CSA research publications that will examine the increase in recorded drug use and possession crime in Victoria. The paper has two key aims. The first is to explore how the number and rate of recorded drug use and possession offences and offenders has changed over the past ten years. The second is to describe the characteristics of these offenders.

The paper will use recorded crime data to answer a number of exploratory research questions, including:

* How has the rate of drug use and possession offences changed over the past ten years?
* Has the rate of individual offenders recorded by police for drug use and possession offences also changed, and if so, to what extent?
* What is the level of repeat drug use and possession offending amongst offenders?
* What are the demographic characteristics of drug use and possession offenders?
* Do repeat offenders differ from one-off drug use and possession offenders in terms of their demographic characteristics?

Future publications in this series will go on to consider:

* whether the rate of drug use and possession crime differs across geographic areas of Victoria, for example, across metropolitan, regional and rural areas
* the type(s) of drugs used and possessed by recorded offenders
* the extent to which drug use and possession offenders also commit other types of crime, and what other types of crime they commit
* what police action is taken against offenders recorded for drug use and possession offences.

Method

**Data**

This study used Victoria Police recorded crime data extracted from their Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) database. The CSA’s offence classification was used to identify offences for inclusion in this study (Crime Statistics Agency, 2015b). The dataset for this study comprised all offences recorded between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2014 that fell into the drug use and possession subdivision of the classification. A series of different counting units, outlined in Table 1, were defined for this study in order to answer the research questions.

Table 1: Counting unit definitions

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Counting unit** | **Definition** |
| Drug use and possession offences  | The number of instances during the relevant reference period where a drug use and possession offence was recorded by Victoria Police.  |
| Unique offenders | The number of unique individuals that were recorded by police for at least one of drug use and possession offence during the relevant reference period.  |
| Drug use and possession incidents | The number of occasions on which each offender was recorded by police for at least one drug use and possession offence.  |
| Repeat offenders | The number of offenders who were recorded for more than one drug use and possession incident over the ten year analysis period.  |

An example of the relationship between each of these counting units is depicted in Figure 1. This diagram represents one unique offender, with two use and possession incidents committed on two different occasions, each of which involves at least one use and possession offence. For the purpose of this study they would be considered a repeat offender who has committed two use and possession incidents with a count of three use and possession offences.

Figure 1: Relationships between counting units



Because the CSA does not hold data on court outcomes associated with offences, references to offences and offenders in this paper refer to alleged rather than proven offences and offenders. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of drug offenders in Victoria either receive a police sanction that requires an admission of guilt or go on to be proven guilty in court, with 92.6% of illicit drug offenders proven guilty in the Victorian Magistrates Court in 2013/14 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). This paper focuses on drug use and possession crime, and excludes analysis of other crime types offenders may have committed over the course of the ten year analysis period including for example, drug dealing and trafficking. The relationship between drug use and possession crime and other crime types will be the subject of future research.

**Statistical tests**

The Kendall’s rank-order correlation coefficient was applied to the monthly offence and unique offender rates over two, five and ten year periods to identify whether any observed movements in the data represented statistically significant short-, medium- or long-term trends. Chi-square analyses (indicated by the symbol: χ2) were also used to examine whether there were any significant relationships between variables, for example, if there were associations between a range of demographic factors and repeat offending.

Results

Between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2014, a total of 123,532 drug use and possession offences were recorded by Victoria Police. These offences were committed by 66,210 unique offenders.

**Rates of offences and unique offenders**

Figure 2 compares the rate of offences and unique offenders per 100,000 population over the ten year period. Statistically significant upward trends were found in both the monthly offence and unique offender rates over the past five and ten years, as outlined in Table 2. The rate of offences increased from 190.8 in 2010 to 323.3 in 2014, which represents an annual average percentage increase of 14.2%. The greatest annual percentage increases occurred from 2010 to 2011 (15.2% increase), and from 2011 to 2012 (19.7% increase). The rate of unique offenders increased to a lesser extent between 2010 and 2014, from 147.0 to 215.4, representing an average annual percentage increase of 10.1%. Again, the greatest percentage increases occurred from 2010 to 2011 (11.3% increase) and from 2011 to 2012 (14.4% increase).

Note that no statistically significant trends were found in monthly offence or offender rates over the past two years. This means that any changes in offence and offender rates in the short term are not significant and the rates can be interpreted as stable over this period. Figure 2 also illustrates that the annual growth in offender rates in particular has slowed over the past two years.

Figure 2: Rate of drug use and possession offences and unique offenders, 2005 – 2014

Table 2: Two, five and ten year trends in monthly offence and offender rates

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Offence Rate** | **Offender Rate** |
|  | Trend | Average annual % change | Significance (*p)* | Trend | Average annual % change | Significance (*p)* |
| 2 year trend (2013 – 2014) | Stable | - | Not Significant | Stable | - | Not Significant |
| 5 year trend (2010 – 2014)  | Increased | 14.2% | <.0001 | Increased | 10.1% | <.0001 |
| 10 year trend (2005 – 2014) | Increased | 6.3% | <.0001 | Increased | 4.6% | <.0001 |

Figure 3 shows the rate of existing and new unique offenders each year per 100,000 population. New offenders are those who have not had a drug use or possession-related offence incident in any previous year within the ten year data set. The early data in this Figure should be interpreted with caution. Because the study only includes data from 2005, some offenders who appear as new offenders early in the dataset may in fact have been recorded for drug use and possession offence incidents prior to 2005. Nevertheless, the rate of new unique offenders has continued to increase since 2010. Figure 3 indicates that this increase has slowed somewhat since 2013. In fact, the rate of new offenders only increased marginally from 135.1 offenders per 100,000 population in 2013 to 136.8 in 2014.

Figure 3: Rate of new and existing offenders per year, 2006 – 2014

**Repeat offending**

Overall, the majority of offenders (71.6% or 47,417) were recorded by police for only one use and possession offence incident over the ten year period from 2005 to 2014. Seventeen percent (*n*=10,949) were recorded for two incidents, 6.1% (*n*=4,024) were recorded for three and the remaining 5.8% (*n*=3,820) were recorded for four or more offences. The maximum number of offence incidents recorded for an individual offender over the ten year period was 34, and the maximum number recorded in a single year was ten. The median number of days between a first and second offence incident for repeat offenders was 431.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of the number of offence incidents for offenders who were recorded for at least one offence incident in each year. Again, the majority of offenders were recorded for just one offence incident per year. However, over the past six years there was an increase in the proportion of offenders recorded for more than one offence incident each year (from 8.6% or 704 offenders in 2009 to 14.6% or 1,838 offenders in 2014).

Figure 4: Proportion of unique offenders recorded for 1, 2, 3 and 4 or more offence incidents per year, 2005 – 2014

**Characteristics of offenders**

The majority of unique drug use and possession offenders over the past ten years were male (81.4%, *n*=53,924). The proportion of unique offenders who were female, however, was slightly higher in 2013 and 2014 than it has been over the past ten years: 18.1% (*n*=2,108) were female in 2013, and 19.3% (*n*=2,406) were female in 2014. Prior to this, the highest proportion of female offenders was 17.5% (*n*=1,418) in 2009.

The majority of drug use and possession offenders were aged under 30 at the time of their first recorded offence incident during the ten year period (62.7%, *n*=41,160). At the time of their first incident, the highest proportion of offenders fell into the 20 to 24 year old age group (27.6%, *n*=18,107), followed by the 25 to 29 year old group (17.6%, *n*=11,581).The age profile of unique drug use and possession offenders has remained relatively stable over time. This is highlighted in Figure 5, which shows the proportion of unique offenders per year that fell into each age group.

Figure 5: Age profile of unique offenders, 2005 – 2014

Overall, there was a small, yet statistically significant relationship between age category at time of first drug use and possession offence across the ten year dataset and sex[[1]](#footnote-1). Females were statistically slightly more likely to fall into the youngest age category, 10 to 14 year olds, at the time of their first offence. As shown in Table 3, 1.0% (*n*=118) of females fell into this category compared to 0.8% (*n*=400) of males. Females were also more likely to fall into an age category older than 35 at the time of their first offence: 11.3% (*n=*1,357) were aged 35 to 39 compared with 9.6% (*n*=5,148) of males;7.9% (*n*=947) were aged 40 to 44, compared with 6.8% (*n*=3,616) of males; and 4.8% (*n*=577) were aged 45 to 49, compared with 3.9% (*n*=2,073) of males. On the other hand, males were more likely to fall into the 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 year old age groups at the time of their first offence, with 17.0%(*n*=9,149)of males aged between 15 and 19 compared with 14.9% (*n*=1,792) of females and 28.1% (*n*=15,037) of males aged between 20 and 24 compared with 25.2% (*n*=3,036) of females. These results are also depicted in Figure 6.

Table 3: Age at first offence incident for females and males

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Female Offenders** | **Male Offenders** | **Total** |
| **Age at first offence** | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** |
| 10 to 1415 to 1920 to 2425 to 2930 to 3435 to 3940 to 4445 to 4950 to 5455 to 5960 to 6465 or older | 1181,7923,0362,1691,6161,3579475772591044120 | 1.014.925.218.013.411.37.94.82.20.90.30.2 | 4009,14915,0379,3946,9405,1483,6162,0731,07946417884 | 0.817.128.117.513.09.66.83.92.00.90.30.2 | 51810,94118,07311,5638,5566,5054,5632,6501,338568219104 | 0.816.727.617.613.09.97.04.02.00.90.30.2 |
| **Total** | 12,036 | 18.3 | 53,562 | 81.7 | 65,598 | 100.0 |

Figure 6: Age at first offence incident for females and males

Employment and relationship status details are also routinely collected by police for the majority of drug use and possession offenders. Of these, over half of all offenders were recorded by police as employed (53.9%, *n*=28,810), 10.3% (*n*=5,491) were recorded as students and the remaining 35.8% (*n*=19,139) were recorded as unemployed. Between 2005 and 2014, there were small decreases in the proportion of unique offenders who were recorded as employed, from 56.7% (*n*=7,190) in 2005to 51.2% (*n*=5,048) in 2014. Conversely, the proportion that were unemployed or students increased slightly over this time: from 36.9% (*n*=2,500) to 37.8% (*n*=3,729) unemployed, and 6.4% (*n*=433) to 10.9% (*n*=1,076) students.

Relationship status was recorded for 73.2% (*n*=48,442) of offenders. Of those, the vast majority were recorded as single (78.7%, *n*=38,110) and the remainder (21.3%, *n*=10,322) were recorded as having a partner. Again these characteristics remained relatively stable over time, though there was a slight decrease in the proportion that were recorded as having a partner, which decreased from 24.7% (*n*=1,469) to 20.0% (*n*=1,801) over the ten year period.

**Characteristics of repeat offenders**

Analyses were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant associations between demographic characteristics and whether an individual was recorded for one or multiple drug use and possession offence incidents over the ten year period. The results of these analyses are detailed in Table 4. Significant relationships were found between repeat offending and sex, age at first offence, employment status and relationship status. Across all of these factors the size of the associations between repeat offending and each demographic factor was small, but statistically significant.

Repeat offenders were more likely to be male than one-off offenders (84.7% or 15,900 of repeat offenders were male compared with 80.4% or 38,024 of one-off offenders). At the time of their first recorded offence in the data set, repeat offenders were more likely to be aged 10 to 14 (1.4% or 270 repeat offenders compared with 1.2% or 540 one-off offenders), 15 to 19 (21.1% or 3,952 repeat offenders compared with 19.0% or 8,911 one-off offenders), 25 to 29 (18.1% or 3,391 repeat offenders compared with 16.7% or 7,832 one-off offenders), or 30 to 34 (13.8% or 2,573 repeat offenders compared with 12.2 or 5,749 one-off offenders). On the other hand, one-off offenders were more likely to fall between the ages of 20 and 24 at the time of their first offence (26.7% or 12,557 one-off offenders compared with 25.0 or 4,686 repeat offenders), or in an age category of 40 years or older.

Further, repeat offenders were more likely to be employed (55.6% or 9,800 repeat offenders compared with 53.1% or 19,010 one-off offenders), or unemployed (39.6% or 6,989 repeat offenders compared with 33.9% or 12,150 one-off offenders), while one-off offenders were more likely to be students (13.0% or 4,639 of one-off offenders compared with 4.8% or 852 of repeat offenders). The results in Table 4 show that repeat offenders were also very slightly more likely to say they had a partner whereas one-off offenders were more likely to say they were single. Given the slightly younger age profile of one-off offenders, these findings may be reflective of the life circumstances of younger people.

Table 4: Characteristics of one-off and repeat offenders

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **One-off offenders** | **Repeat offenders** | **Significance** |
|  | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** | ***p*** |
| **Sex (*n*=66,078)**MaleFemale | 38,0249,274 | 80.419.6 | 15,9002,883 | 84.715.4 | <.0001[[2]](#footnote-2) |
| **Age at first offence (*n*=65,705)**10 to 1415 to 1920 to 2425 to 2930 to 3435 to 3940 to 4445 to 4950 to 5455 to 5960 to 6465 or older | 5408,91112,5577,8325,7494,4763,2581,9381,00946116491 | 1.219.026.716.712.29.56.94.12.21.00.40.2 | 2703,9524,6863,3912,5731,8551,09257322366317 | 1.421.125.018.113.89.95.83.11.20.40.20.04 | <.0001[[3]](#footnote-3) |
| **Employment Status (*n*=53,440)**EmployedUnemployedStudents | 19,01012,1504,639 | 53.133.913.0 | 9,8006,989852 | 55.639.64.8 | <.0001[[4]](#footnote-4) |
| **Relationship Status (*n*=48,442)**SinglePartner | 25,7606,876 | 78.921.1 | 12,3503,456 | 78.121.9 | 0.02[[5]](#footnote-5) |
| **Total (*N*=66,210)** | 47,417 | 71.6 | 18,793 | 28.4 |  |

Discussion

Overall, the rate of drug use and possession offences and related unique offenders has increased over the past ten years. These trends are particularly apparent over the past five years and the rate of offences has increased to a greater extent than the rate of unique offenders. The increases appear to have slowed over the past two years. Continued monitoring of these rates in the coming years will enable an assessment of whether the observed increases since 2010 have now stabilised. The rate of new offenders coming into contact with police has also slowed somewhat since 2013. The number of people who commit a drug use and possession offence on more than one occasion per year has increased year on year over the past five years.

Given that crime statistics may not be an accurate measure of the underlying incidence of offending or of drug use, and other data sources suggest the number of people using drugs has remained stable, a limitation of this analysis is that it cannot be used to explain the precise reason for the increase in recorded drug use and possession crime. The observed increases may be driven by a number of potential factors including, for example, any combination of the following:

* increased police presence at locations where drug use is more prevalent and public
* an increase in the number of police officers employed across Victoria
* increased visibility of drug use or possession (i.e., increased drug use in public places)
* increased focus on policing other crime types (for example, family violence) that may co-occur with drug use and possession
* increases in the frequency of drug use amongst drug users.

This paper is the first in a series of papers that will continue to use recorded crime data to explore drivers of the increase in drug use and possession crime across Victoria. Significant concerns have recently been expressed about increased drug use in regional areas. Little data is currently available about drug use in regional and rural Victoria. In late 2014, the *Inquiry into the supply and use of methamphetamines, particularly ice, in Victoria,* noted that “there is very little data that gives specific information on drug use patterns and prevalence within rural and regional Victoria” (Law Reform, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, 2014: p.xxxv). A valuable extension of the work presented in this paper will be to determine whether the increased rates of offences and offenders described in this paper are attributable to increases in specific geographic regions of Victoria. This will be the focus of the second paper in this series.

Future work will also focus on identifying whether specific types of drugs are contributing to the overall increases in drug use and possession offences. Given significant media and Government focus on increased harms relating to use of crystal methamphetamine (ice), for example, research will where possible, focus on replication of the analyses presented here broken down according to the type of drug(s) used or possessed by offenders.

Significant differences were found in the demographic profiles of those who offended once with those who offended multiple times, though the size of the differences found was quite small. Further analysis will determine whether there are other differences between individuals that are related to the number of drug use and possession offences they are detected for by police. For example, whether there are differences in the type of drugs used or possessed, or whether repeat offenders also tend to be involved in other types of offending. Combined with additional analysis of law enforcement responses to drug use and possession offending, analyses such as these may shed light on whether there are some offenders for whom drug diversion responses are more effective. There may also be cohorts of offenders who are not currently eligible to be diverted but for whom diversion may be an appropriate police response.

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1. χ2=133.82, *p*<.0001, df=11, Cramer’s V = 0.05 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. χ2=162.04, *p*<.0001, df=1, Cramer’s V = 0.05 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. χ2=330.38, *p*<.0001, df=11, Cramer’s V = 0.07 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. χ2=879.53, *p*<.0001, df=2, Cramer’s V = 0.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. χ2=4.02, *p*=0.02, df=1, Cramer’s V =- 0.01 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)