

The impacts of COVID-19 on illicit drug purchasing and trafficking in Australia

CAITLIN E HUGHES^{1,2}, DAVID BRIGHT^{1,3}, R.V. GUNDUR¹, SHARYN GOUDIE¹

¹*Centre for Crime Policy and Research, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia,*

²*National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia,*

³*Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia*

Presenter's email: caitlin.hughes@flinders.edu.au

Introduction and Aims: The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions has had unparalleled impacts on many aspects of our lives e.g. closure of borders, grounding of international air traffic. This project analysed impacts on illicit drug purchasing, trafficking and supply in Australia.

Method: A purpose-built anonymous national online survey – the COVID Drug Supply Survey – was used to examine purchasing and supplying pre and post COVID-19. Variables included the types of drugs purchased and sold, the mechanisms of purchase and sale, drug price and purity, offender demographics, broader drug market changes. 905 people were surveyed between June-September 2020: 678 involved in purchasing alone; 226 involved in supply.

Key Findings: Most respondents noted increased market volatility post COVID-19. There were marked shifts in modus operandi of purchasing and supply including stockpiling and a rise in home deliveries. There were further shifts in the types of drugs purchased and supplied, with a shift away from MDMA. That said few respondents exited the market, with most continuing to purchase and/or supply drugs. Importantly, while some suppliers noted a reduction in their total quantity supplied, others noted a significant increase in total quantity supplied and overall bottom line. We identified several factors affecting whether suppliers experienced growth including type of drugs traded in, state/territory and the extent and nature of supplier innovations.

Discussions and Conclusions: The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions impacted purchasing and supply in Australia in numerous ways, albeit impacts varied significantly across market players. Implications for policy and practice will be discussed.

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