

Ice and Busts: The Lost War on Drugs in Australia

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It was hard to tell whether Australia's Federal Police authorities, along with their Victorian colleagues, were gloating at their latest effort. Thrilled at the unearthing of a stash of methamphetamine, a form of it colloquially known as ice, trumpeted as the "biggest seizure" in Australian history, there was a sense of achievement. They had gotten one up on the drugs gangs, inflicting a blow to the narcotics trade. Celebrate!

Such celebrations, however, are misplaced. For one, they seemed to follow similar celebrations in February, when \$1 billion worth of liquid methamphetamine, concealed in gel push-up bra inserts, were uncovered.[1]

Do these seizures suggest that the police and various enforcement authorities are gaining the upper hand, or perhaps foot dragging before ever enterprising and novel ways of adding to the narcotics market?



A stash of 903 kg of methamphetamines is certainly a remarkable quantity, secreted in boxes of wooden floorboards in an inconspicuous part of east Melbourne. "We located 70 boxes of floorboards," chirped AFP assistant commissioner **Neil Gaughan**. In each of them "was concealed between the floorboards two kilograms of methamphetamine."

But this suggests that there might well be much more, a drugs economy that is thriving in a hot house of high demand. Even **Justice Minister Michael Keenan** has conceded this point, noting that Australia has become one of the most lucrative markets for drug trade in the western world.

Tones of scolding severity duly follow when the phenomenon of drugs consumption is examined, notably among the researchers most interested in those habits of gradual yet mesmerising decay.

“There is no doubt Australia has a culture, especially among our young people, which does not see the taking of illicit substances or binge drinking as particularly detrimental to the health,” claimed **Professor Harvey Whiteford** of the University of Queensland in 2013.[2]

The police also annotate such findings with their suspicions about the inner drug devil in many an Australian. As **Detective Chief Superintendent Mick Smith** of the New South Wales Drug Squad’s Chemical Operation Unit claims with a Presbyterian fury, “1.3 million people in Australia have tried ice. Some of your friends and members of your family would have to have tried ice.”[3] The horror, the horror.

Last month, researchers released findings after examining, somewhat unglamorously, wastewater across 51 sites only to find that methylamphetamine was the most consumed illicit drug in the country. It topped the premier league table of items, beating a range of other contenders such as heroin and cocaine.

✘ For such reasons, this is a battle, if not a poorly described war, that is unwinnable against basic human wishes and market demand. Experimentation and temptation is all, and the world of testing is becoming more diverse than ever. Law and medical authorities are desperate to stifle the interest, and are failing. The central problem is the nagging obsession with drugs as a matter of law and order.

Those participating in the market know this better than anybody else. Even Gaughan concedes with detectable admiration that the methods of novelty in this case on the part of the drug traders were considerable. (One has to beef up the opposition to show your own efforts are worthwhile.)

“You can appreciate the concealment method used in this particular activity is quite complex, quite unique. It wasn’t something we had seen previously.”

The sentiment is often noted.

The battle against drugs was lost in the United States at enormous cost, becoming a continental affair of devastating consequences to security and welfare. Other countries, lagging in efforts to legalise certain drugs and attempts to control the narcotics market, find themselves at the losing end. Warring against desire and instinct eventually unravels. The cartels, and those connected with the prison industrial complex, profit.

It is precisely for such reasons that Portugal decriminalised the use of all drugs, whatever their rank of severity, in 2001. The result? Portugal has 3 drug overdose deaths for every million citizens. The EU average, by way of contrast, is 17.3 per million.[4]

In Australia, a few politicians have decided to shift the emphasis. The Greens leader, **Senator Richard Di Natale**, himself a former drugs and alcohol doctor, convinced his party in 2016 to abandon absolute opposition to the legalisation of illicit drugs.

“It’s time we recognise this as a health problem not a law and order one. We have to have an open, honest conversation about this and stop pretending we’re winning this war.”

Whether it is the heavy hand of the law, or some clumsy variant of it, the campaign against drugs is simply going the way of those who cash in on it, a vast sprawl of vested interests. In the end, the very existence of the police and the enforcement complex thrives on such spectacles, on the illusion of safety and security. As this happens, sickness prevails as the money runs out the door.

In the meantime, lawyers and members of the public will be treated to the picture of overly enthusiastic ministers and police commissioners keen to get the message across that arrests are taking place and drugs seized with dedicated efficiency. During such a process, the rule of law is bound to take a battering, not least of all the presumption of innocence. Grainy images of various suspected figures are already doing the rounds through the papers.

The ministers traffic in votes and illusions, and finding drugs provides a false incentive for both. What is needed, as *The Age* editorial surmised in November last year, is a policy “in favour of a harm minimisation strategy based on decriminalisation, regulation and education.”[5] Paramilitary approaches should be ditched, and resources channeled into health. Portugal, not the United States, should be seen as the model here.

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NOTES

[1]<http://www.smh.com.au/national/ice-worth-1-billion-seized-in-joint-crime-group-operation-20160215-gmu4nz.html>

[2]<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/29/drugs-health-australia-youth-culture><https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/29/drugs-health-australia-youth-culture>

[3]<http://thenewdaily.com.au/entertainment/tv/2017/02/06/ice-wars-abc/>

[4]<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/portugal-decriminalised-drugs-14-years-ago-and-now-hardly-anyone-dies-from-overdosing-10301780.html>

[5]<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/the-war-on-drugs-has-failed-and-australia-must-change-its-policies-20161129-gszwmj.html>

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