Drug Use and Drug Control Policy: Evaluating the Impact of Precursor Regulation on Drug User Behaviour

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology

December, 2012
ABSTRACT

Controlling the availability of illicit drugs and their use is an exemplar of a *wicked problem*. Reducing the scale of the illicit drugs market through suppressing supply has proven extremely difficult. A recent systematic review of studies by Cunningham and colleagues who have produced a series of research papers examining the impact of precursor regulations on various methamphetamine outcomes in North America, argue this research represents the most compelling evidence to date that ‘precursor regulations, or indeed any supply control strategy, can have significant impacts on the retail market for illicit drugs’. The review of this work concludes that the question for future research is ‘not so much whether precursor regulations work, but *which regulations work best and in what context*’; this is the starting point for my research.

The market for methamphetamine is entrenched, broad and dynamic and represents an important criminological and public health problem in Australia. Within Australia the production of methamphetamine has been concentrated in Queensland and that state government has responded by developing a coercive regulatory framework which co-opts pharmacies into a partnership with drug law enforcement that is aimed at preventing the diversion of licit precursor chemicals to the illicit market for manufacture into methamphetamine. In 2005, the Queensland Pharmacy Guild in partnership with the Queensland Police Service developed an electronic medication recording system *Project STOP*, - which is a real-time web based database used by police to track and apprehend ‘pseudo runners’ - to facilitate adherence to the compulsory requirements of recording and reporting sales of pseudoephedrine placed upon them by both health regulations and the criminal law. In my thesis, I refer to the family of innovations (legislative, policy and technological interventions) underpinning the police–pharmacy partnership as Third Party Policing (TPP).

My thesis seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the TPP partnership approach to supply reduction of a specific contemporary drug problem, that is, methamphetamine use. A related aim was to develop and use a theory-driven evaluation framework – that goes beyond the traditional drug supply/demand evaluation paradigm – to assess, in an innovative way, the range of mechanisms that influence changes in methamphetamine treatment seeking behaviour. I achieve this by developing a framework that integrated the strength of a quasi-experimental design with the insights of a theory driven approach in order to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ the intervention worked or not. Meeting these aims required an understanding of: the historical development of drug policy as a state response to a historically situated drug ‘user’; and current theoretical developments in drug law enforcement approaches, specifically third party policing. In addition, I consider the evidence from
epidemiological research that focuses on trends and patterns of drug use behaviour and that highlight the sometimes unintended consequences of law enforcement efforts.

The methodological approach I develop includes firstly, applying a heuristic proposed by Left Realist criminology’s ‘Crime Square’ to develop a theory based evaluation framework. I identified a number of mechanisms drawn from a review of the relevant extant research literature noted above, namely: specific deterrence, compensation, intransigence and diffusion. I then used confidentialised monthly counts from the Alcohol and Other Drugs Treatment-National Minimum Data Set for Queensland from 2002/03 to 2008/09 to develop empirical indicators that measured the mechanisms. I tested the mechanisms by applying Pawson and Tilley’s ‘context-mechanism-outcome’ approach and used interrupted time-series analysis to analyse the indicator series. Overall I found a deterrent effect of the TPP intervention on treatment admissions. I then develop an account for the observed changes that resulted from the introduction of precursor regulations alongside the implementation of a key technology Project STOP in Queensland over the study period. The discussion applies the theoretical framework developed in the first half of the thesis to develop a causal explanation of the macro-micro-macro impact.

In my thesis I unpack the complexity and outcomes of one family of policy responses to one very specific drug problem – methamphetamine users seeking treatment for their drug use. By developing and using a theory driven evaluation framework I have made an important contribution to evaluating a new kind of drug law enforcement intervention – a third party policing approach to preventing precursor chemical diversion. I have built upon Cunningham and his colleagues’, ground-breaking epidemiological research into the impacts of precursor regulations on various methamphetamine indicators and have started a more ‘sophisticated analysis’ of how a supply reduction intervention might impact on drug use behaviour and, by implication, the harms associated with injecting methamphetamine use. The research makes an important contribution to drug policy evaluation efforts by establishing the macro-micro impact of policy on behaviour and by demonstrating the dynamic relationship between two important drug policy pillars, namely law enforcement and treatment.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Ingrid Diana McGuffog
20/12/2012
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<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Australian Crime Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIHW</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AODTS</td>
<td>Alcohol and other drug treatment services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AODTS-NMDS</td>
<td>Alcohol and other drug treatment services national minimum data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASCDC</td>
<td>Australian Standard Classification of Drugs of Concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJS</td>
<td>Criminal justice system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTE</td>
<td>Closed treatment episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURF</td>
<td>Confidentialised unit record file</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLE</td>
<td>Drug law enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUMA</td>
<td>Drug use monitoring in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDRS</td>
<td>Illicit drugs reporting system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGCD</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDSHS</td>
<td>National Drug Strategy Household Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMDS</td>
<td>National minimum data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUSMP</td>
<td>Standard for the Uniform Scheduling of Medicines and Poisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TGA</td>
<td>Therapeutic Goods Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPP</td>
<td>Third party policing</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Undertaking this thesis has been a journey of incredible personal and intellectual growth. The person to whom I would like to extend heartfelt gratitude and without whom none of this would have been possible is my principal supervisor Professor Lorraine Mazerolle. Her belief in me and my ability and her undying patience and support have made this experience one I will treasure. Thank you Lorraine! My other principal supervisor A/Professor Janet Ransley is another incredibly supportive woman, nothing seems to fluster or be a problem for Janet. Her insights helped me to shape my ideas and fuelled my progress. Together Lorraine and Janet were the perfect team; both are inspirational mentors and women who inspire. In the latter stages of my thesis Mr Jason Ferris, came on board and offered me some invaluable insights when it came to interpreting my results and checked over the technical aspects of my analysis.

I also wish to thank Professor Mitch Chamlin from Texas State University who assisted me to learn how to conduct an interrupted time-series analysis. He provided detailed feedback on my early attempts at undertaking this statistical procedure. I am most grateful for his time and effort. I also want to acknowledge the team from the Drug Policy Modelling Programme located in the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, at the University of New South Wales. Professor Alison Ritter who directs the Programme funded part of my research and I was able to attend annual team meetings in the first three year of my thesis. These meetings were invaluable; I was afforded the opportunity to learn much about Australia’s drug policy environment and the varied types of drug policy research being undertaken in the country and overseas. I would especially like to acknowledge the helpful feedback I received from Jonathan Caulkins, Peter Reuter, Paul Dietze, Alison Ritter, Jenny Chalmers and other team members. I need to also thank the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for providing me with the data I used in my research.

I have shared much of my journey with some good friends and colleagues who are young academics of promise, in particular I would like to thank Dr Julianne Webster and Dr Donna Hancox whose encouragement and willingness to debrief over a cup of coffee I will treasure. I would also like to thank Chris and Luke, and the kids from ‘The Boys House of Coffee’, the best café in town and just minutes from where I live. They have been part of this whole process listening to my progress and set-backs and providing me with the best coffee and scrambled eggs to start my day.

I spent most of my final year at my parents’ house in beautiful Noosa where I was afforded the luxury of being supplied with all my needs by my wonderful mother Jan McGuffog. I shared a massive office with my father Douglas, and the time spent together working on our respective
projects sharing the joys and frustrations of long hours and sometimes tedious work was a joy. I also shared much with my sister Stephanie who was always on the other end of the phone when I needed her. Finally, to my husband Greg Sykes, my biggest fan and truly the love of my life; I thank you! The biggest surprise of this whole PhD story was meeting Greg who lives in Tennessee in the USA, and marrying him in the Snowy Mountains in 2011.
To my daughter Lauren who travelled through the darkest places with me, and whose love guided me back...