

# Moral Panic and Perceptions of Community Fear: A Local Community Study Examining Drug Use

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## ABSTRACT

Through a small-scale exploratory study, this paper presents findings from research that examined perceptions of the prevalence of drugs, both illicit and licit, and associated fear of crime. Through qualitative focus groups with members of a regional town in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, the study sought to examine perceptions of drug use based on personal knowledge and again, after official data of actual detected drug use was presented to compare the impact official data had on participants' perceptions. The study also sought to gauge the fear of crime experienced by participants' pre and post the presentation of official data on drug use, thus supporting an examination between the relationship of moral panic and the fear of crime. Using thematic analysis as the analytical approach, the study found that original perceptions of prevalence were inflated when compared to community perceptions/ understanding post presentation of official drug use data. However, presentation of official data did not alter participants' levels of fear regarding drug use and related crime. This research provides evidence that fear of crime levels do not necessarily reduce when a more accurate perception and understanding of drug use and associated offending is harvested.

**Keywords:** Fear of crime, community safety, moral panic, perceptions of crime

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from a small scale exploratory qualitative study into community perceptions of the prevalence of drug use and fear of crime from associated drug related offending. This paper will commence by placing the research into the broad landscape of drug related research and perceptions of offending literature, this will be followed by a brief description of the research design and subsequent method. The findings of the research are framed around the aim of examining community perceptions on the prevalence of licit and illicit drugs in which three research questions were addressed:

- What is the community perception of licit and illicit drug use and related fear of crime in a regional town in New South Wales?

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- In what ways are community perceptions proportional to the actual nature and extent of licit and illicit drug use in a regional town in New South Wales? And,
- To what extent are do community perceptions of use of licit and illicit drugs and fear of crime change when presented with statistical evidence of the actual nature and extent of use in the regional town in New South Wales?

The conclusion sets out the value of the findings for policy makers and key stakeholders in drug and alcohol service provision and community safety; and finally, it posits areas for future research.

### CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY

The research presented in this paper originated from concerns raised by some organisation within a region of New South Wales, Australia,<sup>1</sup> in which the study was conducted, where it had been indicated there was a high level of illicit drug use in the town. Of those organisations, many expressed concerns about what this means for the community and the surrounding region. Through three focus group with community members, the study presented in this paper examines these perceptions and concerns. These perceptions will be analysed in relation to the available statistical and empirical data on drug use in the region to provide a nuanced understanding of the rates, risks and responses to licit and illicit drug use in the NSW regional town under examination.

The use and abuse of licit and illicit drugs is multi-faceted impacting on the social, health and economic wellbeing of individuals, communities and wider society (Collins & Lapsley, 2008). Many Australians, according to Ritter, King, & Hamilton (2013) have developed a propensity to the use of both licit and illicit drugs. For example, the consumption of alcohol is significantly common and entwined in a variety of social and cultural events (Manning, Smith & Mazerolle, 2013), with the use of licit and illicit drugs causing significant harm to individuals, families and the broader community (Manning et al, 2013; Collins & Lapsley, 2008). The most recent statistics available reveal that in 2004-2005, licit and illicit drugs costs Australia around \$55.1 billion (Collins & Lapsley, 2008).

While the latest National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) (2016) published by the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing found that more than 17.1% of Australians consume alcohol at a degree that places them at greater probability of harm because of alcohol-related disease or injury (AIHW, 2016). Furthermore, alcohol attributed

to over 150,000 hospitalisations a year and over 5,000 mortalities (AIHW, 2016). Additionally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated that in 2015-2016, were almost 250,000 victims of physical assault by individuals intoxicated by alcohol (ABS, 2015). On the other hand, around 8.5 million Australians aged 14 years and older had used an illicit psychoactive substance in their lifetime while the use of cannabis continues to be the most commonly used illicit substance by respondents 14 years and older in the previous 12 months (AIHW, 2016).

Furthermore, it was reported that there was a slight increase in recent methamphetamine use amongst those aged 14 years and older there had been a decrease in recent use of methamphetamine ice from 2.3% in 2013 to 1.4% in 2016 (AIHW, 2016). In terms of community perceptions, the NDSHS reported that individuals' perceptions of methamphetamines have changed substantially from 2013 to 2016 (AIHW, 2016). Australians now believe that methamphetamine is the drug of most concern to the community than any other drug including alcohol (AIHW, 2016). This is a significant increase from 16% in 2013 to 40% in 2016 (AIHW, 2016). Similarly, a larger number thought methamphetamine caused the most deaths (AIHW, 2016). It is the first time that methamphetamine has ranked number one for most likely to be associated with a drug problem (AIHW, 2016). In relation to drug related crime and disorder, in 2016, 9.3% of the population had been a victim of an illicit drug-related incident in the previous twelve months (AIHW, 2016). This was a slight increase from 8.3% in 2013 (AIHW, 2016). Nevertheless, the social harms drug use can invoke can be wide ranging.

Licit and illicit drugs may perpetuate mental health problems, violent and aggressive behaviours as well as family breakdown and dysfunction (McKetin, Lubman, Najman, Dawe, Butterworth, Baker, 2014). While the health costs of drug use often comprise emergency department presentations for serious harm; the use of mental health facilities and rehabilitation for long-term harms (McKetin et al, 2014). The use of licit and illicit drugs is also associated with increased the risk of taking part in risk-taking behaviours and the chance of contracting or spreading blood borne diseases such as HIV/AIDS (AIHW, 2016). Moreover, the economic harms include, associated criminal acts, decreased productivity, courts, prisons and police costs (McKetin et al, 2014).

Scientific evidence on the relationship between drugs and crime is contentious with the debate of whether drug use is a causal factor for crime being contested. For example, the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia

(DUMA) run by the Australian Institute of Criminology noted that while some offending is directly linked to illicit drug use, it does not necessarily reflect that drug use is a precursor to crime (Schulte, Mouzos & Makkai, 2005). Nevertheless, other research has offered a strong link between illicit drug use and crime (Halstead & Poynton, 2016). Halstead & Poynton (2016) found that perpetrators that reported using illicit substances at a higher prevalence in comparison to the general population.

While, the offending population is more likely to use illicit drugs in comparison to the general population (Halstead & Poynton, 2016). A large proportion of offenders attribute their criminal activities to illicit drug use, according to Gannoni & Goldsmid, (2017, p. 1) who note “in Australia, three out of every four offenders detained by police test positive for at least one drug (excluding alcohol).” With the NSW Inmate Health survey reporting that 84% of incarcerated individuals had used an illicit substance (Payne, 2007). In relation to specific drug use, regular amphetamine users were more likely to commit property offences (53%) than non-user offenders (Degenhardt, Roxburgh, Black, Bruno, 2008).

In 2014-2015, principal illicit drug offences were the most common in the nation representing 20% or 83,160 offences, while in relation to age, 20–24 year olds were the highest group to commit illicit drug-related offences (Gannoni & Goldsmid, 2017). Moreover, illicit drug use is one of the primary contributors to recidivism, with recidivism being linked to unemployment, low levels of education, homelessness or unstable accommodation, limited social support and services (Payne, 2007). Such social problems can instigate moral panic, a concept devised by Stan Cohen (1972) to outline societal reaction of the Mods and Rockers, which has since been applied to a raft of social ills, for example illicit drug use.

#### MORAL PANIC AND DRUG USE: COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND FEAR OF CRIME

According to the Scott & Marshall (2009, p. 148), moral panic can be defined as “the process of arousing social concern over an issue – usually the work of moral entrepreneurs.” Typically, moral entrepreneurs operate within mass media, for Cohen (2002) the media creates and present news to the population influencing and shaping the perceptions of the community. Albeit the presentation of news should be fair and just, as noted by Birch, Ireland & Ozanne (2018, p. 338) “the media is a powerful social institution, which can set the social and political agenda. Therefore, the media has a responsibility to represent individuals and groups in a fair and just manner, free from stereotypes and negative connotations.”

However, the media's representation of the nature and extent of the deviancy are significantly intensified (Cohen, 2002, p.7). The media present the perception that members of the community are likely to become a victim of the deviant act with such focus contributing to the generation of "concern, anxiety, indignation or panic" by members of the community (Cohen, 2002, p.7).

As noted earlier, moral panic was first applied to the Mods and Rockers in 1960's Britain, however the concept has since been applied to other social problems for example, child abuse, HIV/Aids epidemic and young people and crime. Contemporaneously, moral panic has been applied to aggression (Boyd & Carter, 2012) and drug use (Critcher, 2008; Eversman & Bird, 2017). Specifically, the work of Zajdow (2008) extensively explores moral panic in relation to heroin overdoses and subsequent deaths in the late 1990's. Zajdow's study argues that powerful groups in society helped inform media on the heroin problem by exaggerating its claims and using stories of addicts (Zajdow, 2008). The study found that although there was an increase in heroin overdoses and subsequent deaths, there were elements of moral panic through the media's exaggerated representation of the problem (Zajdow, 2008). This exaggerated representation of heroin use has arguable, more recently, been extended to the use of the drug ice.

According to the mass media, Australia is in the midst of a nationwide ice epidemic (Healey, 2016) and while ice use does cause some individuals to become violent and aggressive (McKetin et al, 2014), ice users are often depicted by the media as being more aggressive than any other licit or illicit drug user (Weidner, 2009; Degenhardt et al, 2008). Furthermore, media and the community perceive ice use as causing significant mental health problems (Weidner, 2009; Degenhardt et al, 2008). Such media reporting of ice use may influence and shape the perceptions of community members on the prevalence of ice use in the community resulting in community members inaccurately believing that there is a high likelihood of becoming a victim of drug related crime involving violence. Invariably, this increases the fear experienced by community members with regards to the communities in which they live (Healey, 2016). The relationship between moral panic and fear of crime is well documented (e.g. Eschholz, 1997; Ungar, 2001) and while the term, fear of crime, is problematic, it is defined through understanding fear and physical harm. Garofalo (1981, p. 814) stated that:

We can define fear as an emotional reaction characterized by a sense of danger and anxiety. We restrict our definition to the sense of danger and anxiety produced by the threat of physical harm. Furthermore, to constitute fear of crime, the fear must be elicited by perceived cues in the environment that relate to some aspect of crime for the person.

It can therefore be surmised, that media influences on community perceptions creates moral panic and exacerbates fear of crime disproportionate to actual levels of victimisation (Healey, 2016). Moral panic is created and perpetuated through the mass media's use of sensationalised headlines and melodramatic vocabulary (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2010), while the media have a propensity to disregard health expert's advice and actual statistics (Weidner, 2009). What such studies illustrate is how the media misrepresent and exaggerate statistics when communicating news on issues such as drug use as well as broader crime and disorder issues.

Weatherburn (2011) advises that the media may abuse official crime and health statistics through a number of ways. This includes, constructing the idea that crime is increasing, the selective use of statistics and the selective reporting of statistics (Weatherburn, 2011). In addition, official statistics may not accurately represent the complete nature and extent of crime, that is, police may not arrest all people committing a particular crime or may choose to apply discretion and not arrest or record a particular crime (Weatherburn, 2011). The current study builds on the themes of community perceptions, fear of crime and drug use by examining community perceptions on the prevalence of licit and illicit drugs in a regional town of NSW, Australia.

## METHODOLOGY

Utilising a qualitative framework, the primary data collection technique used in this study was focus group interviews. This method of data collection was adopted as focus groups are recognised to elicit participants' perceptions on the prevalence of licit and illicit drug use in the community and related fear of crime (Kruegar & Casey, 2009). Further to this, focus groups allow participants to engage in interactive discussions in which unique and significant data is generated where it may not have been created in other research methods (Hennink, 2014). This accordingly translates into in-depth understandings of participant perceptions (Hennink, 2014). May notes, "focus groups are an important research tool

as it assists researchers in investigating group norms and dynamics” (May, 2011, p.137).

The overarching aim of the study was to examine community perceptions on the prevalence of licit and illicit drugs. This aim informed the following research questions which guided the data collection:

1. What is the community perception of licit and illicit drug use and related fear of crime in the New South Wales regional town?
2. To what extent are community perceptions proportional to the actual nature and extent of licit and illicit drug use in the NSW regional town?
3. In what ways are community perceptions of use of licit and illicit drugs and fear of crime changed when presented with statistical evidence of the actual scope and nature of use in the New South Wales regional town?

### **Sampling and recruitment procedure**

Three focus groups were established for the study. The focus groups included eight participants in each of the focus groups, with a total of 24 participants. This study adopted a purposive sampling framework using snowball recruiting with local council members of the regional town provided support in this process. All participants either worked, studied or lived in the local government area of the regional town used in the study and were drawn from council employees, night time economy workers, and university students. 58% were males and 42% were females. The age of focus group participants ranged from the youngest being 20 to the eldest being 77 years old. The average age (mean) of focus group participants was 36 years old.

### **Data collection, analysis and ethics**

The focus groups were conducted using several prompts to stimulate discussion, these prompts included: How prevalent are drugs in the community? What drugs do you most associate with a ‘drug problem’? What drugs, if any, do you think are causing a problem in the community? How do you see the community being impacted by drug use? How many people do you think are seeking treatment for illicit drugs? Where do individuals go to seek help within the community? What do you think are the main factors contributing to drug use in the community? Do you think drug-related offending is a problem in the community? Have seen drugs being dealt or know of drug dealing in the area? Do you know anyone

addicted to drugs and how this has their addiction affected their relationships?

Thematic analysis was undertaken as it could be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches, and because of its theoretical freedom and versatility (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.5). The thematic analysis provided an emphasis on what was said in the interviews, rather than how it was said and included a framework approach outlined by Ryan & Bernard (2003). This approach allowed for the development of an index of central themes to be used to construct the analysis. One of the researchers led on the data analysis and identified the themes in the analysis, while the remaining two researchers verified the themes through a second round of data analysis. The data analysis yields three central themes from the data collection: 1. Community perception and fear, 2. Community understanding of drug use, 3. Official data and community understanding.

Approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Charles Sturt University, Australia was gained prior to commencement of fieldwork.

## FINDINGS

### **Theme one: Community perception and fear**

The theme centred on gaining an understanding and insight into community perception of licit and illicit drug use and related fear of crime within the regional town the study was conducted in. The dataset within this theme revealed that most of focus group participants suggest that the prevalence of illicit drugs in central west NSW regional town was considerably high. Participants feel that illicit drug use is of major concern to the community and that drug use is primarily concentrated in certain areas of the main metropolitan areas of this region. Furthermore, participants had heightened levels of related fear as all 24 participants expressed a high fear of becoming a victim of crime, in particular from ice users.

There was a consensus among participants that ice use is widespread in their community and the consequences are significant, such as high crime rates. A common pattern found within the dataset under this theme the prominence of ice. For all focus group participants, it was unanimously recognised that ice is the drug of most concern and causes the most problems in their community. This is illustrated by one participant from focus group three who stated “it’s very prevalent, quite often, you only

have to walk around and see someone on something. I don't know what, but you can hear their tempers, the way they talk", "you probably think ice."

In each focus group, participants perceived illicit drugs were easily accessible and obtainable in their regional town. This was illustrated by Focus group one participants who believed that there was frequent drug dealing in the area. Participants within focus group one also alluded to knowing of actual drug dealing being conducted in the area and that it was common to know where drug dealing occurs amongst this group of participants.

Overall, based on their knowledge of drug use in their regional town participants were primarily concerned with violence associated with ice use. The focus group participants associated quite strongly that ice use resulted in users becoming aggressive and violent. Throughout the focus group interviews, participants repeatedly focused on ice as being a major contributor to the high levels of domestic violence in region. Participant six from focus group two proposed "people affected by ice are committing domestic violence and impacting families."

In sum, the data analysis yielded that the participants thought drug use was rife within the region and that ice was the drug of most concern. This perception of drug use in the region led many participants to agree with the notion that this increased the risk of being a victim to a violent crime.

## **Theme two: Community understanding of drug use**

The second theme to emerge from the dataset involved understanding what the participants thought the nature and extent of drug use was in their region. What the data analysis revealed was focus group participants thought the extent of drug use was high and that the nature of this drug use centred on ice. All 24 participants unanimously indicate that ice is the drug of most concern and causes the most problems in the community. For example, Participant three, focus group three explains "it's very prevalent, quite often, you only have to walk around and see someone on something. I don't know what, but you can hear their tempers, the way they talk", "you probably think ice."

An interesting finding from the focus groups was how participants primarily focussed on the use of ice in the community, rather than licit drugs such as alcohol. Alcohol was only considered as an issue when prompted by the focus group lead in which one participant in focus group

two simply stated, “drinking does have its problems.” These findings from the dataset presented in this paper highlight both the disproportionate and less severe perception, among participants in terms their personal knowledge of the nature and extent of drug use.

### **Theme three: Official data and community understanding**

Finally, the third theme revealed through data analysis centred on the impact official data made on participants in terms of influencing their understanding of drug use in the area and subsequent fear of crime. This finding is captured under the following theme: Official data and community understanding.

The central premise of this theme led to identifying whether knowledge of licit and illicit drug use in the regional town increased or decreased peoples’ perception of drug use in the region as well as their fear of crime. Of those who took part in the study, the views and understanding of the participants’ changed slightly with knowledge of the actual nature and extent of crime. Nevertheless, their fear of crime remained the same. Participants, even upon presentation of the official drug data, still perceived ice use as the drug causing the most harm to the community than any other licit and illicit drug, and contribute to their fear of crime, in particular, of being a victim to violence. For example, upon presentation of the official data one focus group participant commented “that’s not what I was expecting. Looking at the statistics it’s a pretty small amount.”

Further to this, participants perceived ice use as a significant contributor to domestic violence and non-domestic violence despite statistics highlighting alcohol is a more significant factor. This highlights participants’ perceptions on the consequences of victimisation from ice use may not reflect relative levels of victimisation experienced in the central west regional community this study took place. In sum, fear of crime did not alleviate for the participants of the study when presented with official data on drug use, allowing for a more accurate understanding of drug use to emerge.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

While this is a small-scale study that examines the perceptions of a particular regional community in New South Wales, Australia, the findings of this study are of value. First, those who took part in the study reported that illicit drug use was a significant issue within their region. Despite participants not being aware of official data and statistics, theme one and two of the data analysis revealed that all focus group members considered

ice to be a significant problem. Those who took part in the study offered a limited understanding of the true nature and extent of drug use in the area, in particular with the issue of alcohol. Participants perceived illicit drugs, particularly ice use as causing more harm to the community. These findings are reflective of the results reported in the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) (AIHW, 2016) where the community perception of the drug ice was the drug of most concern to the community (AIHW, 2016).

This finding was the first-time alcohol had been considered a less serious problem to the community compared to illicit drugs (AIHW, 2016), a finding reflected in the study presented in this paper. Nevertheless, statistics from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) and the latest NDSHS (AIHW, 2016) reveals that alcohol causes more harms to the community than illicit drugs. This is important to note as there was no consensus within the focus groups that alcohol use was a problem in their region. Alcohol was only considered as a potential problem after the focus group leader promoted participants of the view about alcohol.

Furthermore, while participants believed the drug ice was the main problem within their regional town, the available official statistics shows that the town where the study took place, has relatively low rates of ice use in the community. The official statistics also showed that the rate of victims of non-domestic alcohol-related assaults was significantly high in the region in which the study took place, thus, reaffirming that alcohol causes more harm in the community than illicit drugs. Nevertheless, the participants failed to recognise a more accurate understanding of the nature of the problem. BOCSAR identifies there were 439 victims of alcohol related assault per 100,000 population in regional town that took place in the study from July 2016 to June 2017 (BOCSAR, 2017). This was significantly higher than the NSW average rate during the same time period of 294 per 100,000 population (BOCSAR, 2017). Further to this, according to BOCSAR (2017), the rate per 100,000 population of incidence of ice use and possession was far lower in the regional town in which the study was conducted compared to other drug related offences such as the use/possession of amphetamines (excluding ecstasy) (BOCSAR, 2017).

The perception and understanding of drug use within the region were impacted on in a limited way when those who took part in the study were presented with official data related to drug use, nevertheless the impact on fear of crime was not. As Garofalo (1981) noted, fear of crime is a

response to anxiety and physical harm induced by the perception that crime is occurring in your locality, which in turn reflects many sentiments offered by the focus group participants.

These sentiments were consistent amongst the participants both pre and post presentation of the official drug use data. Given that the feelings of fear of crime did not change, the implications of such findings are just presenting the actual prevalence of crime/drug use may not be enough to alleviate community fears. However, as noted earlier in the paper, the media can be responsible for creating and sustaining community views on a range of social problems (Cohen, 2002) with the work of Zajdow (2008) and Healey (2016) contextualizing this within the use of drugs, in which moral panic can be engendered. For example, Healey notes how the media has labelled Australia as being during an ice epidemic. Perhaps the impact on community perception of drug use and their subsequent fear of crime may be altered through more accurate media reporting than simply through the presentation of official data. There may also be a role in community policing with regards to the role of elevating fear of crime. The work of Roh & Oliver (2005) and Cordner & Melekian (2010) has considered the role of community policing in the reduction of a community's fear of crime as well as effective strategies to be employed in this endeavour.

In conclusion, the community's perception of drug use and their subsequent fear of crime is a common problem that stimulates an inaccurate understanding of the contemporary nature and extent of crime and disorder of drug use. Further research would benefit from examining the effects of more accurate media reporting on drug use and the effects on community views and feelings of safety, as well as the role of community policing in positively impacting on drug use perceptions and related fear of crime. This type of evidence could inform policy development in the areas of crime prevention and community safety and stimulate effective outcomes for the community.

#### NOTE

1. Organisations not disclosed to retain the anonymity of the region in which the study was conducted.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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