

# Illicit drugs in New Zealand: an overview

## Introduction

Despite New Zealand's proximity to Australia and the two nations' social and cultural similarities, the situation with illicit drugs differs in a variety of ways. The Bureau asked New Zealand Police to report on the illicit drug landscape in New Zealand—the current situation, trends, and aspects of policing.

## Legislation

Illicit drugs in New Zealand are controlled by the *Misuse of Drugs Act 1975*, whereby drugs of abuse are classified according to three schedules. The classification is based on whether a drug has a licit use, and consequently a therapeutic value, and whether it has the potential to cause harm. First Schedule, or Class A, drugs are considered to have the greatest potential to cause harm and attract the greatest penalties for misuse; Second Schedule (Class B) and Third Schedule (Class C) drugs are considered less dangerous and consequently attract lesser penalties.

## Regulation

As in many other parts of the world, drug abuse in New Zealand is viewed from the health perspective—it is seen as affecting the health and wellbeing of the drug user as well as the social wellbeing of the wider community. The *Misuse of Drugs Act* is administered by the Director-General of Health, within the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Justice administers the *Misuse of Drugs Amendment Act 1978*, Part II, which deals with detention, enforcement and sentencing. Amendments to the *Misuse of Drugs Act*—including the scheduling or rescheduling of drugs—are effected only with parliamentary consent.

Two agencies are responsible for enforcing the legislation: New Zealand Police and the New Zealand Customs Service.

## Enforcement

The National Drug Intelligence Bureau coordinates and collates drug intelligence in New Zealand. With representation from three agencies—New Zealand Police, the New Zealand Customs Service and the Ministry of Health—the Bureau was formed in 1972. It is governed by a Board of Control consisting of the chief executives of the three agencies represented.

The Bureau records, analyses and disseminates all the illicit drug-related information it obtains from sources within New Zealand and elsewhere. A team of full-time police

and Customs officers is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Bureau, with input from employees of the Ministry of Health.

Border enforcement is the responsibility of the New Zealand Customs Service. Its three drug investigation units, at Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, provide national coverage and work closely with the police.

New Zealand Police has drug units in all major centres; they use both overt and covert investigative techniques, such as aerial cannabis surveillance, undercover agent deployments, and electronic interceptions.

## The National Drug Policy

The New Zealand Government launched its National Drug Policy in July 1998. In relation to illicit drugs, the Government has taken a harm-minimisation approach, which involves limiting the harm caused by, and the hazards of, drug use; reducing the use of cannabis and other illicit drugs; and reducing the health risks, crime and social disruption associated with drug use.

Within the terms of the National Drug Policy, the newly established Ministerial Committee on Drug Policy has directed that attention focus on two specific matters:

- cannabis use in the far north and on the east coast of the North Island;
- preventing the development of a market for hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine.

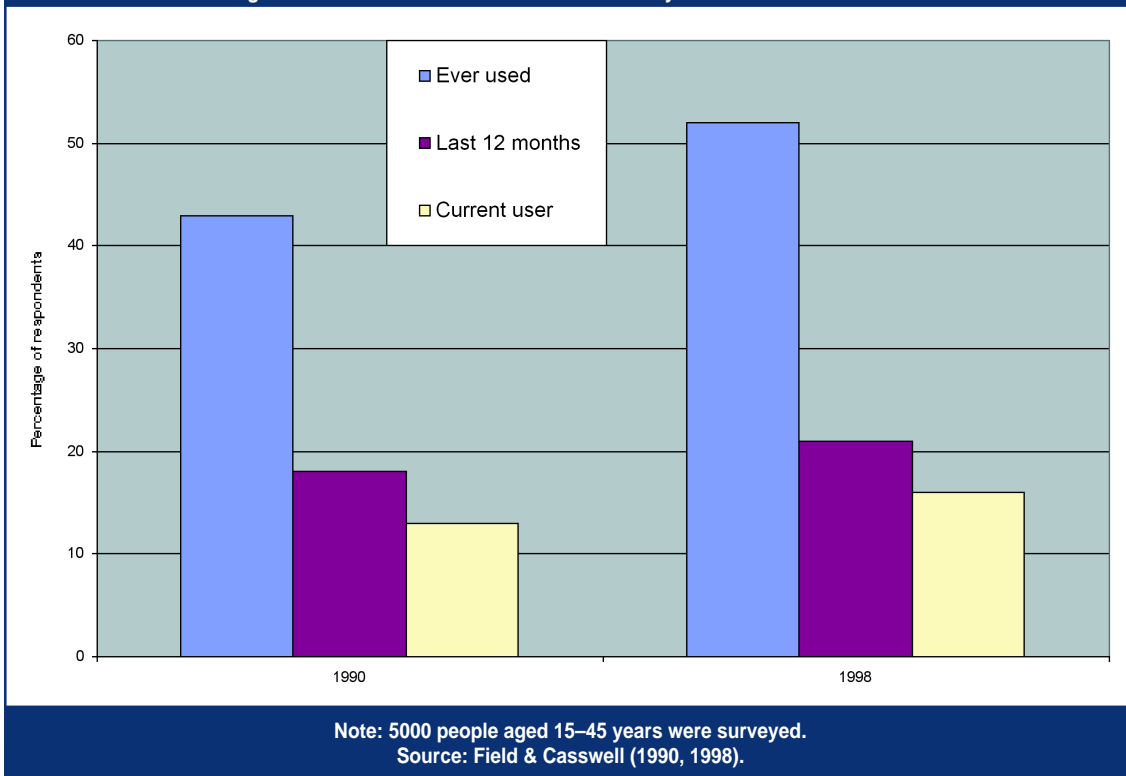
Detailed plans have been developed for both these areas of work and approved by the Ministerial Committee. Among the initiatives emphasised are improved information about and research into drug abuse, targeted education strategies, and greater coordination between agencies.

## Cannabis

It is believed that American servicemen stationed in New Zealand during World War II introduced cannabis to the islands. The 1950s saw the emergence of limited use among some New Zealand musicians: at that time all the cannabis was imported.

Although it is not known when the first cultivation offence was reported to the police, cannabis cultivation is now widespread and New Zealand produces enough cannabis to satisfy its own market. From small beginnings, cannabis has become a very lucrative crop for the growers and

Figure 7.1: Cannabis use in New Zealand: survey results for 1990 and 1998



represents easy money for the dealers. Organised crime groups, predominantly gangs, are responsible for the majority of cannabis grown and distributed.

Large-scale outdoor cultivation, harvesting and distribution now characterise the New Zealand cannabis scene. This typically involves planting and tending plots hidden in remote bushland all over the country. In some instances growers remain with their plots for the entire growing season; in more accessible areas they might visit their crops daily. Growers are known to be armed and to use traps and electric fences to deter people and animals from entering and destroying or damaging crops. Hydroponically cultivated cannabis is becoming popular because it offers higher potency, a year-round growing season and better crop security.

Between 1994 and 1996 the Institute of Environmental Science and Research studied the physical and chemical characteristics of cannabis plants, in particular their average dry-leaf yield. The plants studied were from the police cannabis-eradication program, so the figures relate to immature plants and are not indicative of potential yields had the plants been allowed to grow to maturity. The researchers concluded that the weight of the seedless floral parts of the female plants examined ranged from 0.5 to 268.0 grams and averaged 40.2 grams.

The New Zealand Government has said it will review the legal status of cannabis. It is possible that it will follow Australia with some form of decriminalisation of small amounts of cannabis for personal use.

### Potency and prices

There are four main grades of cannabis in New Zealand. The highest grade is known as 'seedless heads'. The next grade is known as 'seeded heads' and the third grade is a mixture of seedless or seeded head and cannabis leaf, known as 'mix'. The lowest grade is called 'cabbage': it consists of low-potency leaves from the bottom of the plant and is primarily used for the production of cannabis oil.

Between 1994 and 1996 the Institute for Environmental Science and Research assessed 110 samples of cannabis for THC content. The potency varied between 1.0 and 8.8 per cent, averaging 3.4 per cent. The THC content of hydroponically grown cannabis analysed in late 1994 ranged from 2.7 to 5.5 per cent. Two samples analysed in 1995 had THC contents of 6.6 and 6.7 per cent. A single sample analysed in early 1996 contained 8.8 per cent THC.

Cannabis is usually sold in New Zealand in standard amounts known as 'bullets', 'ounces' and 'pounds'. A bullet is a small amount wrapped in tinfoil; it is sufficient for about three 'joints' and usually sells for NZ\$20.

Cannabis is sometimes sold in dollar amounts: \$50 bags, weighing about 4 grams and sufficient for eight joints, are the most common.

An ounce of cannabis is commonly known as an 'oh zee'; it is usually sold in a plastic bag and is sufficient for 50 to 60 joints. The street-level price for an ounce of seedless head is usually NZ\$300 to \$400, although it can be as low as \$200 or as high as \$600.

A pound of cannabis—commonly known as an ‘ell bee’ or an ‘elbow’—weighs between 448 and 460 grams and is usually sold in a bread bag or supermarket bag. A pound of heads usually sells for NZ\$3200 to \$5000, although it can cost as little as \$2000 or as much as \$7000.

### Cannabis products

Cannabis oil is manufactured in New Zealand and is popular with users. It is available in two grades—premium quality, which is referred to as ‘gold’, and standard, referred to as ‘oil’. Between 1993 and 1995, 605 samples of cannabis oil were analysed for THC content. The results ranged from 0.1 to 67.0 per cent and averaged 13.0 per cent.

Cannabis oil is sold in small gelatine capsules—commonly known as ‘Myadec capsules’ or ‘caps’—for about NZ\$30; gold commands between \$60 and \$70 a cap. On average, each cap contains about 0.4 grams of cannabis oil. The product is also sold in 35-millimetre film canisters, which contain about 28 grams and retail for \$1200 for gold and \$600 for oil.

Cannabis resin, or hash, is not made in New Zealand and is not popular. When it is available, a chip of about 0.2 grams sells for about NZ\$40.

### Drug user surveys

In 1990 and 1998 the Alcohol and Public Health Research Unit at the University of Auckland conducted drug use surveys in New Zealand (Field & Casswell 1990, 1998).

Each survey involved a random sample of about 5000 people aged between 15 and 45 years from the greater Auckland metropolitan area and the provincial area known as the Bay of Plenty. Respondents were asked about their use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other drugs.

The surveys found that cannabis was the third most popular drug in New Zealand, after alcohol and tobacco. Figure 7.1 shows the changes in cannabis use between 1990 and 1998. The proportion of people who had ever tried cannabis increased from 43 per cent in 1990 to 52 per cent in 1998.

Both the 1990 and 1998 surveys found, however, that at least two-thirds of people who had ever tried cannabis had stopped using the drug.

Figure 7.1 also shows a substantial gap between respondents ever having tried cannabis and using cannabis in the 12 months preceding the surveys. Overall, 21 per cent of the 1998 sample had used cannabis in the preceding year, compared with 18 per cent in the 1990 sample. The percentage of current users increased from 13 per cent to 16 per cent.

### Cannabis arrests

Figure 7.2 shows the number of males and females arrested for cannabis-related offences in 1999. Dealing offences are the most serious; possession offences involve quantities that can be shown to be for personal use only, and they are much more common among both males and females.

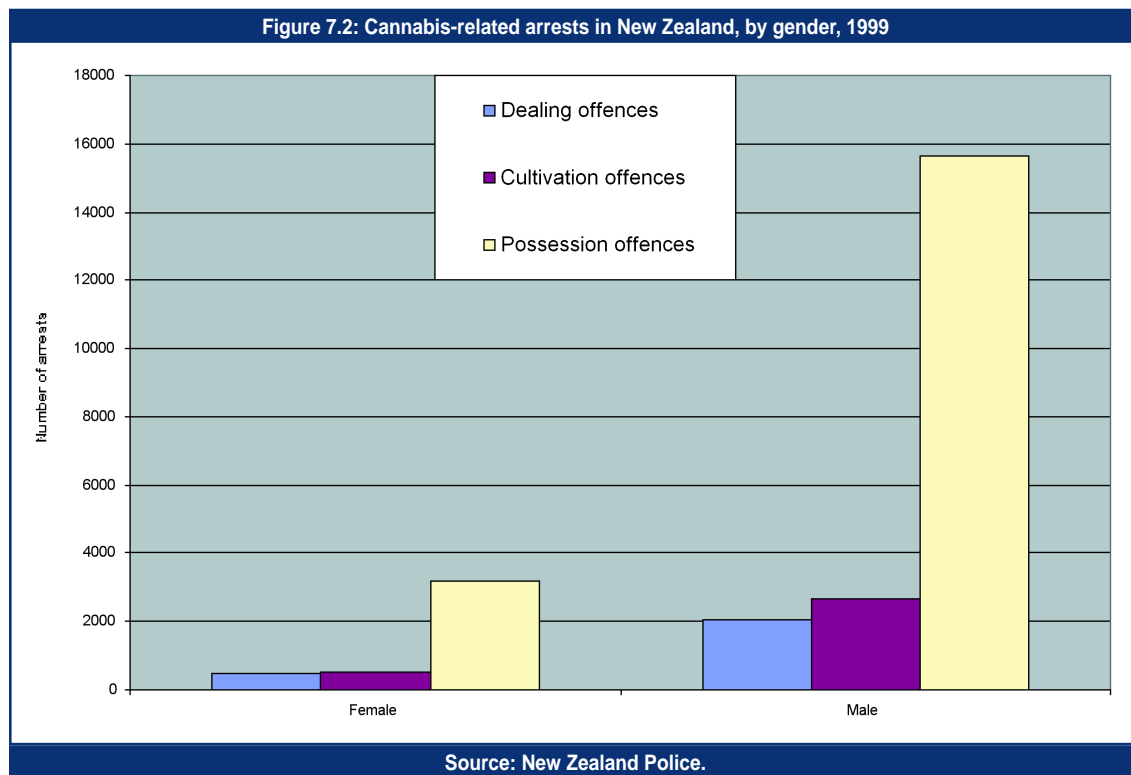
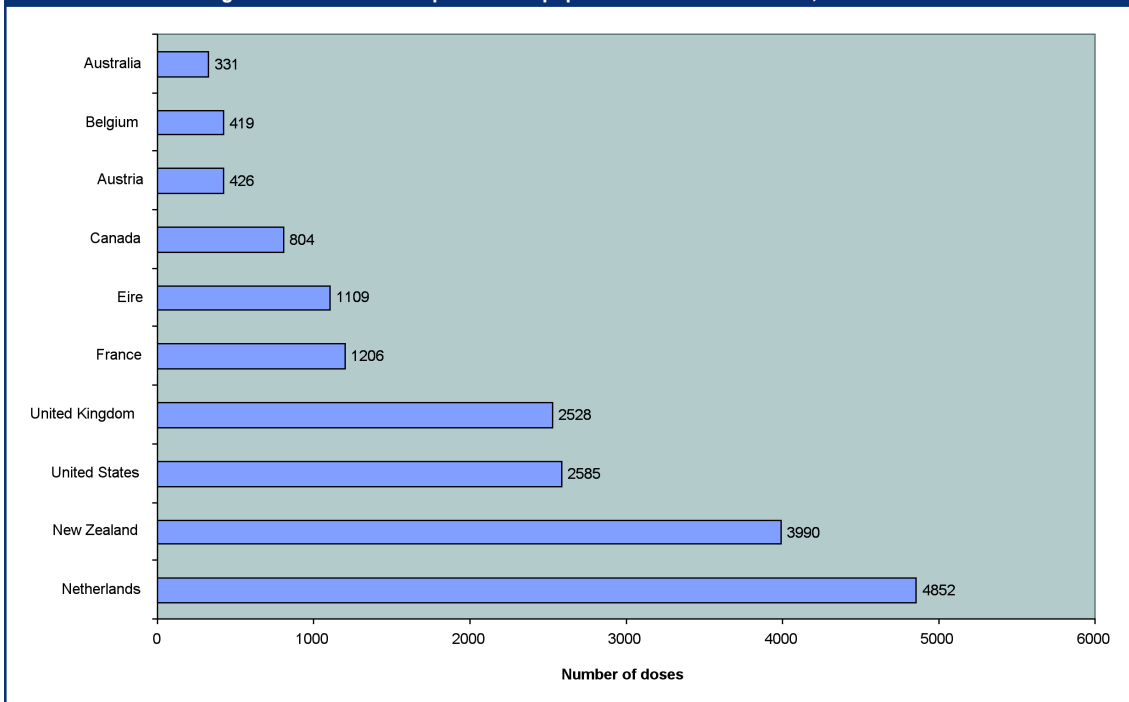


Figure 7.3: LSD seizures per 100 000 population: various countries, 1990 to 1994



Note: United States figures are for seizures by the Drug Enforcement Administration only. Complete seizure figures are not available for the Netherlands, Austria and Australia. Source: Johnson (1995).

## LSD

In New Zealand LSD has long been the drug of choice after cannabis. This is in contrast to other nations, where a particular drug's popularity waxes and wanes in response to any number of factors.

In New Zealand, LSD use can be traced through various lifestyle groups, among them the surfing fraternity, fans of heavy rock and 'punk' music and, more recently, people involved in the 'rave', or 'dance party', scene.

New Zealand has one of the world's highest per capita rates of LSD use, and ranks seventh in terms of the number of dose units seized (Johnson 1995). These figures might be interpreted as demonstrating the high standard of police and Customs detection and investigation practices, but a more realistic interpretation is that they are indicative of a high user population.

For comparison, Figure 7.3 provides details of LSD seizures per 100 000 population in the 10 countries with the highest seizure rates between 1990 and 1994.

As is to be expected, countries that manufacture LSD—such as the United States, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom—are prominent. The very high rate for New Zealand, which is a consumer country, not only points to the drug's appeal there but also gives cause for concern.

## Potency and prices

There are a variety of street names for LSD in New Zealand—'acid', 'dips', 'luckies', 'lucky dips' and 'tabs' are examples. A single dose is normally called a 'trip', 'tab' or 'ticket'. Most often, the LSD is impregnated in blotting paper printed with some kind of design or logo. Sometimes it is found in tablet or pellet form, commonly referred to as 'microdots'—these were quite common in the past but are now seldom encountered in New Zealand.

Seventy-one of the 212 samples of LSD that were submitted to the Institute for Environmental Science and Research over two years were subjected to potency analysis. Potency levels varied from 6.5 micrograms per unit to 108 micrograms per unit, averaging 34.89 micrograms. It should be noted, however, that only 71 samples were subjected to full analysis. The results are thus not conclusive: they provide only an indication of LSD potency in New Zealand.

The street-level price of a single dose of LSD ranges between NZ\$30 and \$50, with \$30 to \$40 being the norm. As with any drug, LSD is cheaper when bought in bulk: a bulk purchase of 100 doses would bring the price down to between \$16 and \$20 per dose or even less.

## Drug user surveys

In the 1990 and 1998 surveys by the Alcohol and Public Health Research Unit at the University of Auckland respondents were asked about their past use of

hallucinogens (LSD, hallucinogenic mushrooms and MDMA)—whether they had ever used these drugs, whether they had used them in the preceding 12 months, and whether they were current users. Figure 7.4 provides details for LSD.

In both 1990 and 1998 the most frequently reported hallucinogen—in terms of ‘ever used’, ‘used in the preceding 12 months’ and ‘current user’—was LSD; it was followed by hallucinogenic mushrooms and then MDMA (ecstasy). The proportion of respondents who had ever tried LSD doubled between 1990 and 1998.

The 1996 Census of New Zealand recorded 3 618 300 people resident in the country. Of these, 1 641 777 were aged 15 to 45 years. Looking at Figure 7.4 and the 3 per cent of survey respondents who were current users in 1998, one can thus deduce that there were 49 253 LSD users.

The 1998 survey did not collect data on frequency of use or the number of dose units an LSD user consumes in a year. (Very little information exists—in New Zealand and internationally—about rates and frequencies of LSD consumption.) It is possible to assume that a user would use the drug on a weekly, fortnightly, monthly or two-monthly basis. Applying this assumption to the New Zealand situation, if the frequency of LSD use is between one month and two months and one dose unit is used on each occasion, then New Zealand would be importing between 295 500 and 591 000 dose units each year.

There is little evidence that New Zealand is regularly used as a transit country for LSD. Although there was an international controlled-delivery operation in 1992 where 20 000 LSD doses were intercepted in transit to Australia, in general the LSD entering New Zealand is intended for domestic consumption.

### LSD arrests

Figure 7.5 shows the numbers of males and females arrested for LSD-related offences in 1999. There is very little difference between the number of people arrested for the more serious offence of dealing and those arrested for possession for personal use.

### Amphetamine-type substances

Like other countries, New Zealand has experienced an increase in the use of amphetamine-type substances. Before 1997 there were very few seizures of MDMA, but in 1999 over 16 000 tablets were seized. Airline passengers, mail and air freight are common methods of importing ecstasy tablets, which come from Western Europe. There is no evidence that ecstasy is being produced locally.

The primary users of ecstasy appear to be young people associated with the ‘rave’, or ‘dance party’, scene. There have been two ecstasy-related deaths in New Zealand: both people had taken the drug at a dance party.

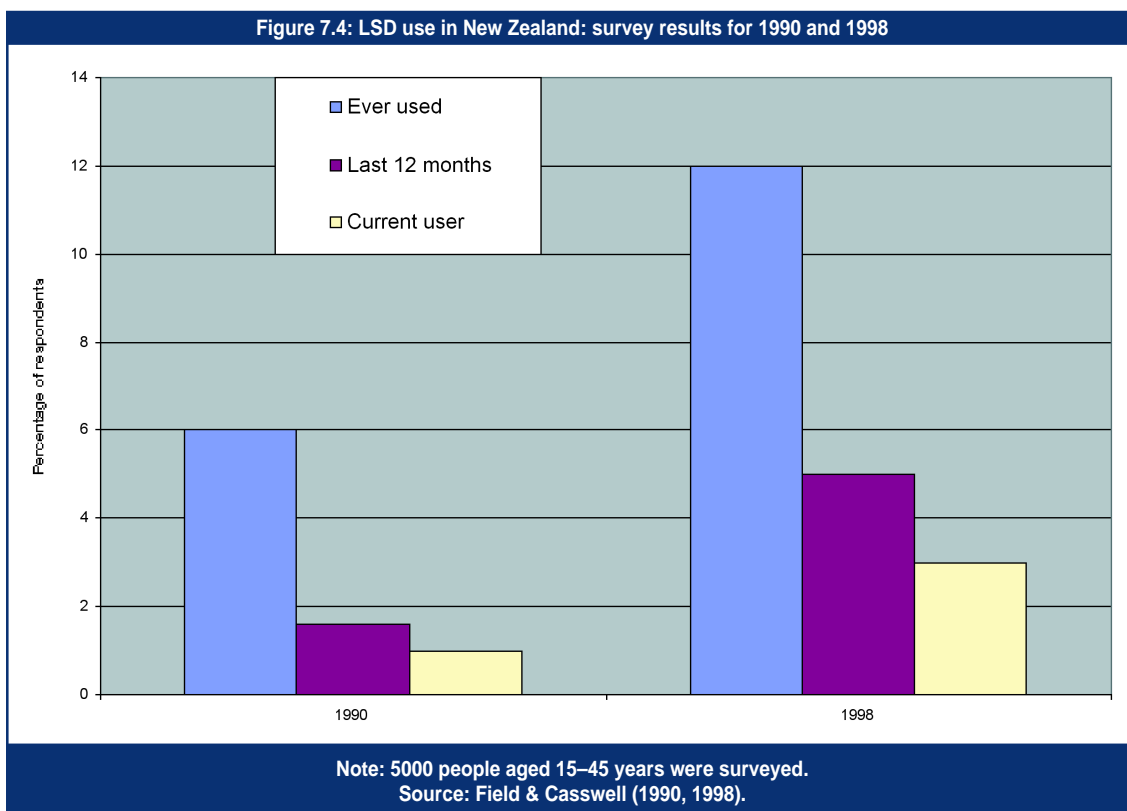
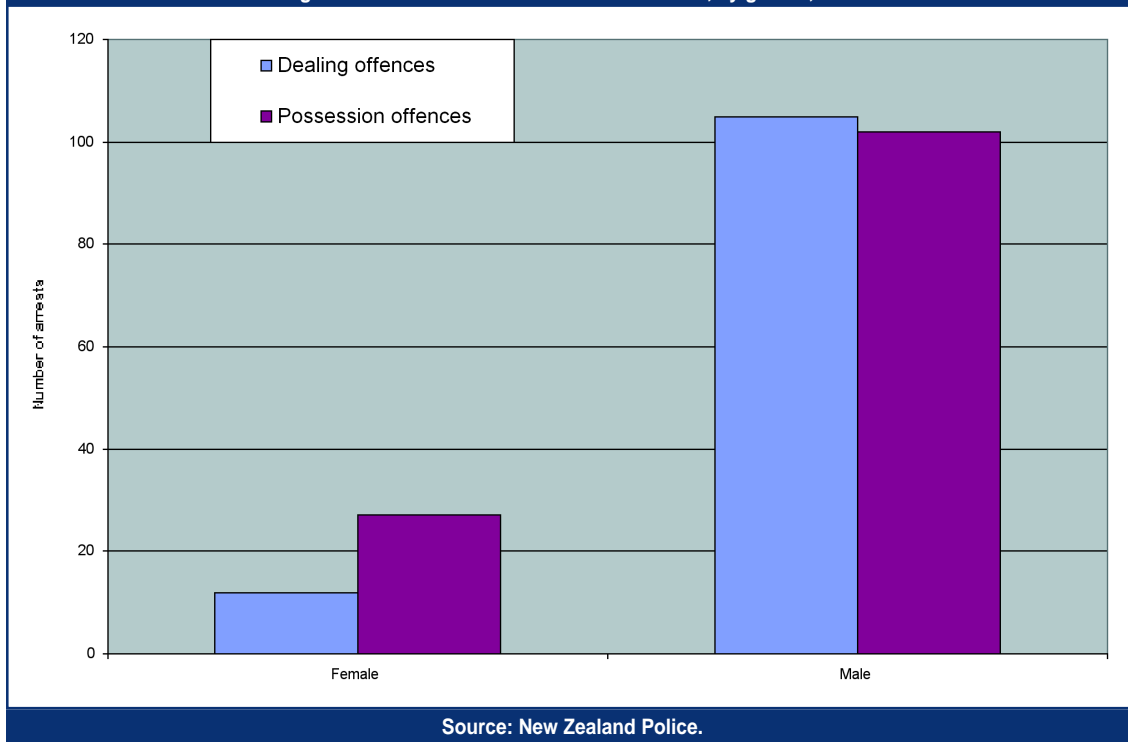


Figure 7.5: LSD-related arrests in New Zealand, by gender, 1999



Ecstasy users report that the Asian amphetamine-type drug 'Ya Ba' is available, although supplies are erratic. The most recent seizure of Ya Ba was a pink pill with the logo 'WY'.

New Zealand has difficulty policing the use of amphetamine-type substances because the analogues and new varieties of the drugs are not generally covered in the schedules to the *Misuse of Drugs Act 1975*, which allow for searching for and seizing such drugs. The New Zealand Government has introduced an amendment to the Act that, when passed, will allow for the expeditious scheduling and rescheduling of new designer drugs when they are encountered.

One of the major organised crime groups, Hell's Angels, has been suspected of manufacturing methamphetamine since the early 1990s. Several prominent members have been linked to methamphetamine laboratories, and recent intelligence suggests that all major outlaw motor cycle gangs are involved in manufacturing and distributing methamphetamine.

The purity of locally manufactured methamphetamine varies between 40 per cent and almost pure. Organised crime groups retain 'cooks'—people who specialise in manufacturing methamphetamine. They consider these cooks their primary assets and will go to extreme lengths to protect them.

New Zealand has legislated against the illicit diversion of essential precursor chemicals. As happens in Australia, the chemical processes involved in methamphetamine manufacture change in response to enforcement activity

associated with the chemicals of choice at the time. There is evidence of a move away from pseudoephedrine-based manufacture to the use of phenylacetic acid combined with acetic anhydride—the P2P precursor method. Indications of the higher yielding 'Nazi', or lithium-ammonia, method of manufacture have also emerged.

Organised crime groups have used illegally secured company letterhead or set up fictitious companies to obtain precursor chemicals direct from bulk chemical suppliers. Law enforcement agencies have, however, been educating pharmacists and employees of pharmaceutical companies about the methods methamphetamine manufacturers use to obtain pseudoephedrine, and this has helped to limit illicit drug manufacture. 'Sudafed runs', whereby people obtain Sudafed tablets by visiting a number of pharmacies, still occur, but continued education may eliminate this ploy for obtaining pseudoephedrine. Liaison between enforcement agencies and chemical suppliers has led to the uncovering of clandestine laboratories involved in methamphetamine manufacture. Although at present no formal agreement exists in relation to chemical suppliers reporting suspicious transactions, work is under way to resolve this.

In 1999 New Zealand Police detected five methamphetamine-manufacturing laboratories; in the nine months to September 2000 six such labs were detected. Anecdotal information suggests that methamphetamine manufacture has expanded rapidly. The street-level price of the drug has nearly halved in the last several years and users report no discernible difference in purity.

There has also been an increase in inter-gang violence, which is strongly linked to the manufacture and distribution of methamphetamine. In 2000 two inter-gang shootings were directly linked to methamphetamine. The gang members themselves are also using methamphetamine and as a result are becoming increasingly paranoid. This is causing warring over distribution markets. Inter-gang violence will probably increase in keeping with the expansion of the methamphetamine market.

New Zealand has experienced an increase in kilogram-sized seizures of amphetamine coming in to the country's Polish community in air freight from Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. The amphetamine is concealed in computer parts. Several seizures of this Polish amphetamine have been linked with organised crime groups.

### Potency and prices

Ecstasy seized by New Zealand Police in 1999–2000 showed purity levels of between 12 and 97 per cent, averaging 36 per cent. Street-level ecstasy prices have remained stable, at between NZ\$80 and \$100 per tablet, and there is no apparent supply shortage.

The last reported seizure of Ya Ba had a purity level of 17 per cent amphetamine. Ya Ba can be bought for between NZ\$40 and \$50, although supply is erratic. Street-level purchases of methamphetamine have a purity of between 1 and 15 per cent, the norm being 5 to 15 per cent.

They vary in price from NZ\$100 to \$180 a gram. The price variation is dependent on the supplier, not the purity.

The amphetamine seized from Poland was 60 per cent pure.

### Drug user surveys

The 1998 survey by the Alcohol and Public Health Research Unit at Auckland University asked respondents about their use of amphetamine-type substances. As Figure 7.6 shows, 3 per cent of respondents had tried ecstasy, 2.1 per cent had taken it in the preceding year, and 1.6 per cent described themselves as current ecstasy users. This is a large increase over the 1990 survey results, where 0.9 per cent of respondents reported having tried ecstasy, 0.4 per cent reported having taken it in the preceding 12 months, and 0.2 per cent described themselves as current users.

Taking the 1996 Census of New Zealand figures, the 1.6 per cent of current ecstasy users represents 26 268 people aged 15–45 years. There is no information available on the amount used by a person, although a single dose taken each month would mean that over 315 000 tablets had to be imported each year.

The proportions of current users and those who had used amphetamines in the 12 months preceding the surveys more than doubled—see Figure 7.7.

In 1990, 4 per cent of respondents reported having ever tried amphetamines; by 1998 the figure had increased to

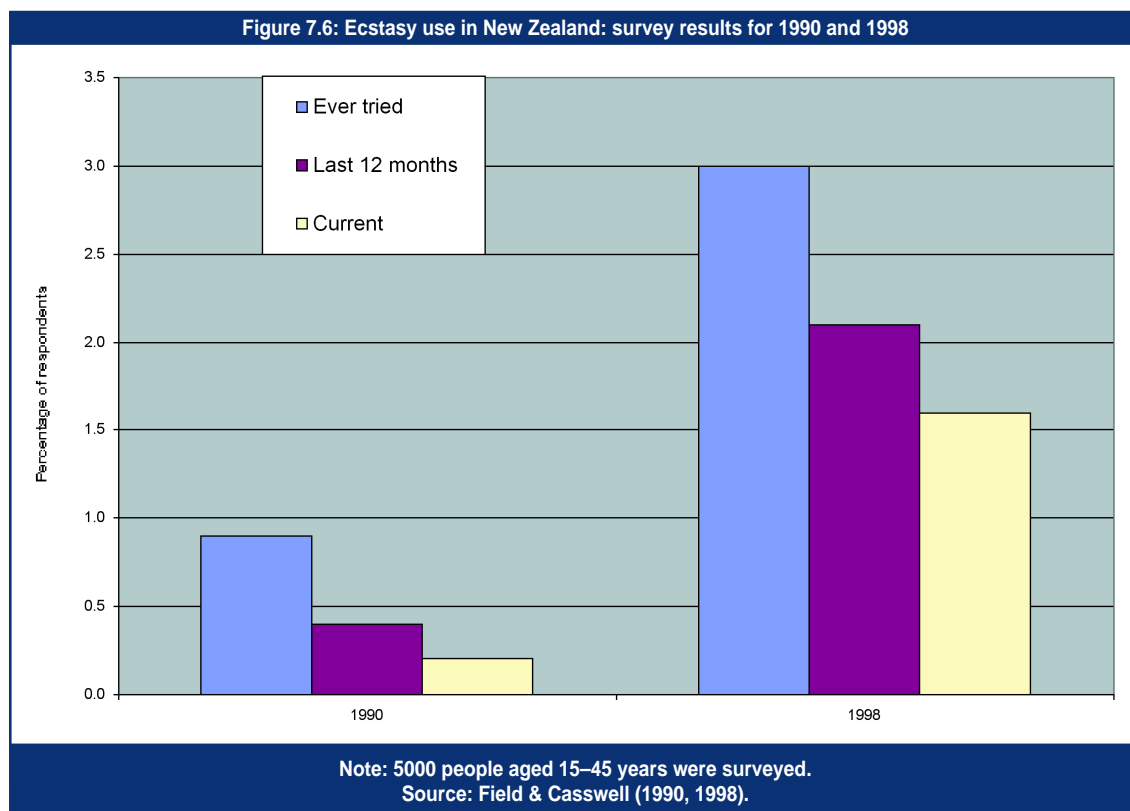
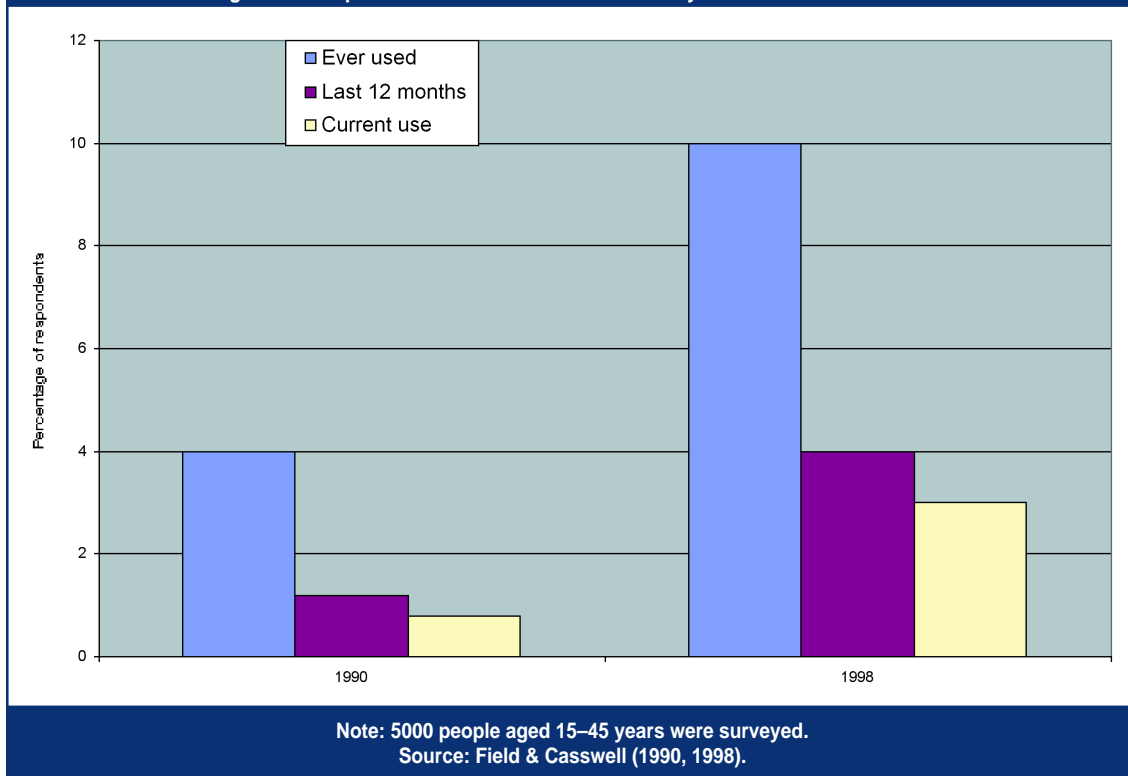


Figure 7.7: Amphetamine use in New Zealand: survey results for 1990 and 1998



10 per cent. The proportion of those who had used amphetamines in the preceding year rose from 1.2 per cent in 1990 to 4 per cent in 1998; the equivalent proportions for current users were 0.8 per cent and 3 per cent. The trend towards increased user numbers will probably continue as distribution networks compete to establish their territory and client base, thus creating a ‘buyer’s market’.

### Arrest figures

Figure 7.8 shows the number of males and females arrested for offences connected with amphetamine-type substances in 1999.

### Cocaine and heroin

There is little use of cocaine and heroin in New Zealand. The high selling price of the drugs may be responsible for this. Cocaine commands of NZ\$300 to \$400 a gram, whereas methamphetamine costs \$100 to \$180 a gram, making it a more attractive product. Cocaine seizures rarely exceed 100 grams; most importations are of quantities for personal use. Imported heroin is relatively scarce and expensive, at \$800 to \$1200 a gram.

Some opiate abusers obtain prescription medicines such as morphine sulphate tablets and convert the morphine content into heroin, known as ‘homebake’.

The 1998 survey by the Alcohol and Public Health Research Unit at Auckland University showed that less

than 1 per cent of respondents were current users of cocaine, 0.02 per cent of respondents were current users of heroin, and 0.6 per cent of respondents were current users of ‘any opiates’.

New Zealand is used as a transit country for cocaine consignments from South America to Australia. Between March 1996 and June 1999 in Australia, at least 37 couriers were intercepted arriving from New Zealand on Aerolineas Argentinas. They were carrying a combined weight of 130 kilograms of cocaine. Since June 1999 very few couriers have been intercepted arriving by air. In February 2000, however, the yacht *Ngairé Wha* arrived in Sydney after having received 502 kilograms of cocaine from the yacht *Bora Bora II* off the coast of New Zealand.

In New Zealand there have been several multi-kilogram seizures of heroin destined for the Australian market. Such importations into Australia will probably continue, with New Zealand being used as a transit country in an attempt to disguise the drugs’ country of origin.

### Conclusions

- New Zealand is self-sufficient in cannabis, and it is thought that all the cannabis grown in the country is for domestic consumption.
- Surveys show that the number of people who have tried cannabis has increased, from 43 per cent in 1990 to 52 per cent in 1998.

- The New Zealand Government has said it will review the legal status of cannabis. It is possible that New Zealand will follow Australia, introducing some form of decriminalisation of small amounts for personal use.
- The cultivation of hydroponic cannabis is likely to increase: it offers the advantages of a year-round growing season, higher potency, and less risk of detection.
- All LSD consumed in New Zealand is imported.
- Surveys suggest that the proportion of people currently using LSD is increasing: 3 per cent of respondents reported current use in 1998, compared with 1 per cent in 1990.
- Surveys suggest that New Zealand imports between 300 000 and 600 000 doses of LSD each year.
- LSD is used at 'dance parties' in much the same way as ecstasy is used. As the popularity of these events increases, the use of LSD may also increase.
- There is little evidence that New Zealand is used as a transit country for LSD being imported into other countries.
- The use of methamphetamine is set to increase: surveys show an increase in the number of current users from less than 1 per cent in 1990 to 3 per cent in 1998.
- The incidence of inter-gang violence is likely to increase as each gang tries to dominate the market and gang members' use of the drug increases their paranoia.
- The likelihood of crime being committed by methamphetamine users will probably grow as addiction levels increase.
- Local manufacture of methamphetamine is likely to increase as a result of the risks associated with importing the drug into New Zealand and the increased demand by users.
- Illicit diversion of precursor chemicals will probably continue, contributing to increased manufacture of methamphetamine.
- There is no evidence that the cocaine and opiate markets will expand. The cost of these drugs will probably keep them out of reach for most drug users.
- There is strong evidence that New Zealand will continue to be used as a transshipment point for large-scale heroin and cocaine movements to other countries, especially Australia.

### References

- Field, A & Casswell, S 1990, *Drug Use in New Zealand: comparison surveys*, University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- Field, A & Casswell, S 1998, *Drug Use in New Zealand: comparison surveys*, University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- Johnson, N 1995, *LSD: a global view*, Interpol Central Bureau, London.

**Figure 7.8: Arrests connected with amphetamine-type substances in New Zealand, by gender, 1999**



Source: New Zealand Police.