

Cocaine



KEY POINTS

- While the number of cocaine seizures in Australia remained stable, the weight of seizures significantly decreased.
- Seizures of cocaine in countries which have not traditionally been viewed as having established cocaine markets may be indicative of attempts to develop new global trafficking routes.
- Border detections of cocaine decreased significantly from the previous year, with the majority of detections (by number) occurring in the postal stream.

MAIN FORMS

Cocaine is a crystalline alkaloid powder obtained from the *Erythroxylon coca* plant, indigenous to South America. It is the most powerful stimulant derived from a natural source (ONDCP, 2006) and affects the uptake of dopamine in the body (NSW Department of Health, 2005). Cocaine is used in medicine as a local anaesthetic, particularly for the eyes, nose and throat. The predominant form of cocaine is cocaine hydrochloride, or hydrochloride salt, and has similar qualities to amphetamine (UNODC, 1998).

'Crack' is the street name for cocaine hydrochloride that has been processed using ammonia or sodium bicarbonate and water. It is then heated to remove the hydrochloride base, producing a smokeable form of cocaine (NIDA, 1999). The name implies the cracking sound of the substance when heated (NIDA, 2006; DEA, 2006). Cocaine can be snorted or injected, and the alkaloid form of 'crack' cocaine smoked (NSWDH, 2005; UNODC, 1998). This form of cocaine is not readily encountered in Australia.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Colombia remained the primary global supplier of cocaine, followed by Peru and Bolivia (ONDCP, 2006). Following a decline in 2004, the Colombian cultivation of coca bush increased by 6,000 hectares to a total of 86,000 hectares in 2005. Despite the eight percent increase, Colombian coca cultivation was 47 percent lower than the recorded peak in 2000 (UNODC, 2006). In 2005, the combined illicit cultivation of coca bush for Bolivia, Colombia and Peru equalled 159,600 hectares—equivalent to the potential manufacture of 910 metric tonnes of cocaine (UNODC, 2006). Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay and Venezuela remain important transit countries for cocaine shipped out of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia.

Colombian smuggling syndicates continued to export multi-tonne shipments of cocaine and increasingly used West African countries along the Gulf of Guinea as transit points for smuggling cocaine into Europe and North America (INCB, 2006). Cocaine seizures were also recorded in countries which traditionally have not been noted as cocaine markets. These include China, Hong Kong, South Africa, Kenya and India. It is unclear whether these seizures represent a broadening of the global cocaine market or the development of new cocaine shipment routes.

The Colombian Government maintained its eradication and alternative development projects. Efforts to eradicate coca in Bolivia and Peru also continued. Through *Operation Purple*, the INCB maintained efforts to globally monitor the shipment of potassium permanganate, an important chemical used in the manufacture of cocaine.

It is likely that syndicates will continue to target Australia through established staging points in Africa and Asia. While some larger shipments may be detected, it is likely that seizures will continue to be in the small to medium range via air passengers and the postal stream.

DOMESTIC TRENDS

Australian border situation

Cocaine detections at the Australian border in 2005–06 fell significantly both in weight and in number. Eighty-three kilograms of cocaine was found in 376 detections. This represented a 57 percent drop in weight and 15 percent drop in the number of detections, from the total of 193 kilograms found in the 443 detections in 2004–05 (see Figure 19).

Cocaine was imported by air passenger couriers and through ‘scatter imports’ involving consignment to Australia of a large number of small quantities of cocaine in postal articles and air cargo parcels. However, there was an absence of detections of large, professionally organised seaborne shipments sent to Australia as sea cargo, by motherships meeting pickup vessels at sea, by seagoing small-craft, or with crew of merchant ships (see Figures 20 and 21).

Figure 19: Number and weight of detections of cocaine at the Australian border, 1995–96 to 2005–06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)

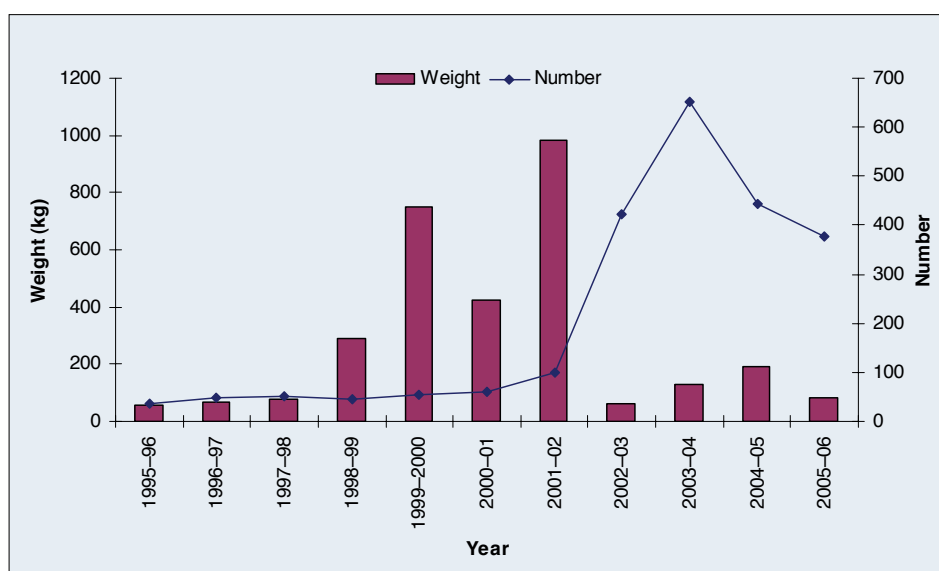


Figure 20: Number of detections of cocaine at the Australian border, by method of importation, 2005-06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)

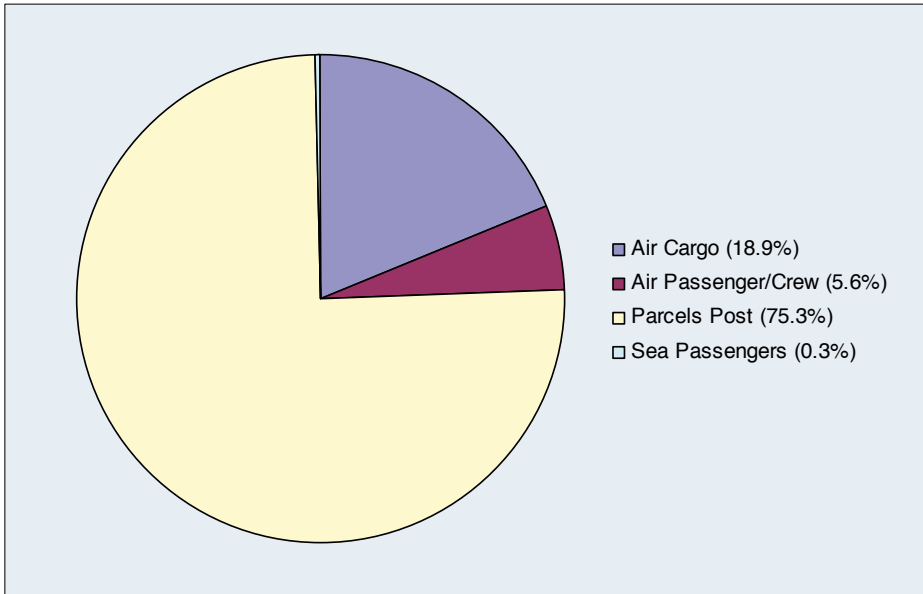
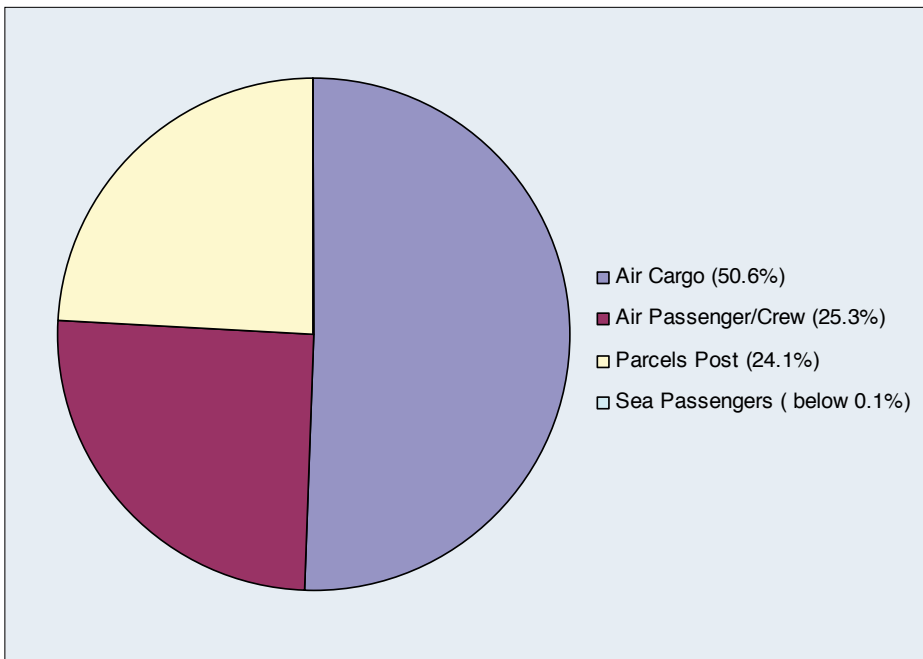


Figure 21: Weight of detections of cocaine at the Australian border, by method of importation, 2005-06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)



Significant border detections

Significant border detections of cocaine in 2005–06 included:

- Six kilograms of cocaine concealed in an air cargo item sent from Colombia to Sydney detected on 15 March 2006;
- 1.9 kilograms of cocaine concealed in an air cargo item sent from Chile to Sydney detected on 8 March 2006;
- Almost five kilograms of cocaine concealed in the luggage of a male Korean air passenger travelling from Japan to Sydney on 18 July 2005;
- Nearly four kilograms of cocaine powder concealed in the luggage of a Canadian air passenger who travelled from Canada to Sydney 21 January 2006; and
- Three kilograms of cocaine detected on 16 December 2005 in candles sent by air cargo from Colombia to Sydney.

Importation methods

The reporting year saw no sea cargo detections of cocaine. The biggest detection of cocaine was six kilograms in an air cargo item. A total of 41.6 kilograms of cocaine was detected in air cargo, 20.9 kilograms with air passengers, and 20.2 kilograms in postal articles. There were 21 detections over one kilogram—12 in air cargo, seven with air passengers and two in postal articles.

Involvement of West African organised crime syndicates in Australia in the importation of cocaine in the postal, air cargo and passenger streams continued in 2005–06. Cases of cocaine smuggling from Canada suggest involvement of Australian organised crime syndicates with long established connections in Canada. Alternatively, they may also be indicative of long established Asian organised crime involvement in Canada and Australia.

Embarkation points

Embarkation points of significant attempted cocaine imports (an aggregate detected weight of cocaine of at least one kilogram in 2005–06) were, in weight order: Colombia, US, Canada, Chile, South Africa, China, Japan, Brazil, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Hong Kong, Thailand and Tanzania. An interesting development was the emergence of imports of cocaine from China (over five kilograms) and Hong Kong (over two kilograms). Embarkation data are affected by air transport connection patterns and location of air traffic hubs and do not necessarily reflect the true origin of drugs.

DOMESTIC MARKET INDICATORS

The extent of Australian cocaine usage is difficult to quantify. Results from the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey indicate that over 770,000 Australians aged 14 years and over had ever used cocaine. Over 169,000 of these (one percent of the population), had used cocaine in the previous 12 months (AIHW 2005). While some studies suggest that the user population consists of persons who are socially integrated, successful and of high socio-economic status (Campbell, 2001), other research suggests that the user population consists of an additional group comprised of those who inject cocaine and are among lower socio-economic status within the community. This group, particularly situated in the Sydney area, are generally unemployed with higher levels of criminal behaviour, sex work and heroin use. In addition, this study found two types of cocaine providers—one group typically supplied injecting drug users and the second supplied those who were socially integrated. The second type was also found to be involved in the supply of MDMA (Shearer, Johnston, Kaye, and Collins, 2005).

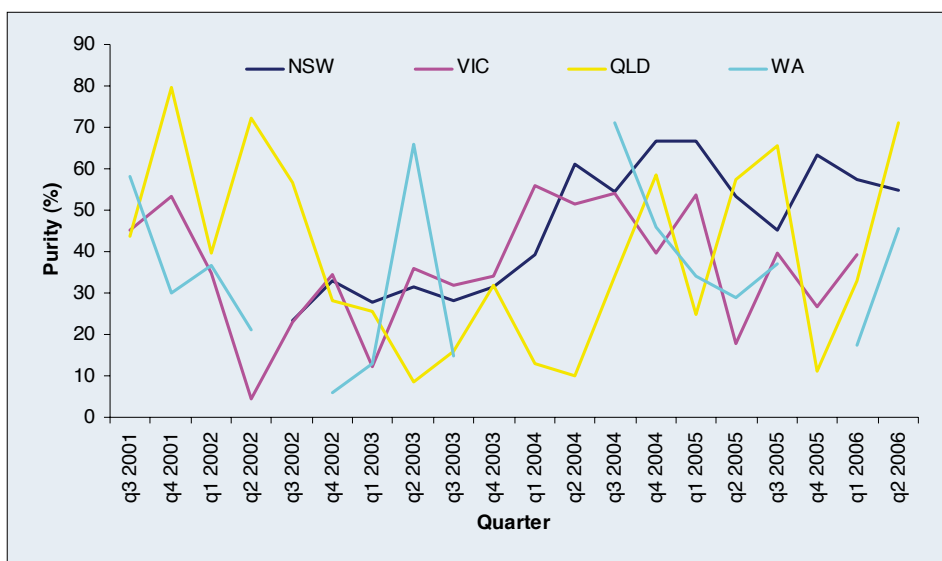
Price

Over recent years, cocaine in New South Wales was generally cheaper than in other jurisdictions, most likely due to greater availability. However, data from the 2005–06 reporting period evidenced an increase in New South Wales prices from \$150 to \$450 per gram. Cocaine was the cheapest in South Australia, with starting prices at \$250 per gram, however, the price per kilogram in New South Wales was cheaper than in South Australia. The Northern Territory was the most expensive state, with the price of one gram reaching \$600. Queensland prices increased during 2005–06 from \$225 to \$250 to \$350 per gram. The price per gram in Western Australia stabilised during the reporting period.

Purity

Figure 22 represents the diverse fluctuations in cocaine purity analysed in Australia since 2001. Due to the infrequency of seizures analysed in some jurisdictions, only New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia are shown in the chart.

Figure 22: Median purity of cocaine samples, 2001–02 to 2005–06



Note: Breaks in the lines in this chart indicate that no seizures were analysed in that quarter.

Availability

Cocaine use in Australia is generally reported as low, in comparison to cannabis and ATS use. However, it is estimated that almost three tonnes of cocaine are consumed each year in Sydney and Melbourne (Shearer et al., 2005). Overall cocaine use is reported to have peaked in 1998 and declined since (AIC, 2006). The prevalence of cocaine injection is reported to have increased around 2000–01 and decreased in 2003 (Milner and McGregor, 2004; MCDS, 2004). This uptake of cocaine may have been a consequence of heroin shortages during the same period. Results from the AIC's *DUMA Project* showed an overall decline in the proportions of police detainees testing positive to cocaine since 2001. However, the level of detection increased slightly in 2005 from levels detected in 2004 (Mouzos, Smith and Hind, 2006).

The 2006 NDARC survey of injecting drug users showed similar trends of cocaine prevalence to previous years' studies. Seventy-nine percent of New South Wales respondents, and all Victorian respondents, indicated that cocaine was 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain, with other jurisdictions reflecting difficulties in sourcing the drug or having very low numbers of respondents who could comment on availability (NDARC, 2006). Surveys of regular MDMA users within the same period indicated that respondents experienced difficulties in purchasing cocaine in the majority of jurisdictions (NDARC, 2006a). Queensland Police Service has reported increased availability of cocaine in Southeast Queensland, particularly on the Gold Coast. This has been evidenced by reports of increased cocaine availability and follows on from a large increase in arrests in the previous reporting period (2004–05).

Many cocaine and amphetamine users are reported to be poly-drug users (NSW Department of Health, 2005; Milner and McGregor, 2004), however, contrary research suggests that cocaine users generally do not experiment with other drugs (Campbell, 2001). This disparity in findings is likely to be an indication of the existence of two different user groups, as outlined above. Between 1999 and 2003, over 63 percent of police detainees who tested positive to cocaine also tested positive to opiates (Milner and McGregor, 2004).

Seizures and arrests

The number of cocaine seizures in Australia increased slightly in 2005–06, however, there was a significant reduction in the weight of cocaine seized (see Figure 23). During 2004–05, cocaine consumption remained relatively stable with Sydney remaining the focal point of cocaine use domestically. This trend is reflected in 2005–06, with the majority of seizures occurring in New South Wales. South Australia reported the only increase in weight seized when compared with the previous year's figures (see Table 13).

Figure 23: National cocaine seizures, by weight and number, 1996–97 to 2005–06

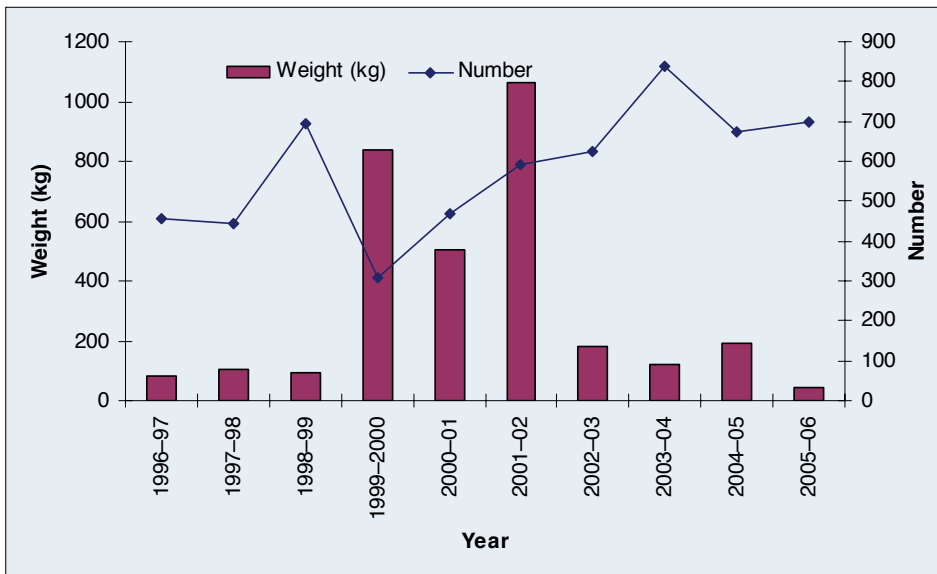


Table 13: Number, weight and percentage change of national cocaine seizures, 2004–05 and 2005–06

State/territory ^a	Number			Weight (grams)		
	2004–05	2005–06	% change	2004–05	2005–06	% change
NSW	351	507	44.4	75,774	37,452	-50.6
Vic	29	51	75.9	6,252	3,698	-40.9
Qld	80	79	-1.3	4,531	942	-79.2
SA	31	16	-48.4	1,420	2,425	70.8
WA	153	33	-78.4	102,725	1,513	-98.5
Tas	0	1	–	0	1	–
NT	26	3	-88.5	538	5	-99.1
ACT	6	7	16.7	589	26	-95.6
Total	676	697	3.1	191,829	46,062	-76.0

a. Includes seizures by state/territory police and AFP for which a valid seizure weight was recorded.

The majority of arrests for cocaine occurred in the eastern seaboard states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland (see Table 14). While the number of arrests remained stable in Queensland, this followed a substantial increase the previous year. There was a slight decrease nationally in arrests, partly due to the decreases evidenced in New South Wales and, to a lesser extent, Western Australia. Care should be exercised in comparing arrests in all states and territories due to the small numbers.

Table 14: Number and percentage change of national cocaine arrests, 2004–05 and 2005–06

State/ territory ^a	Arrests		% change
	2004–05	2005–06	
NSW	229	208	-9.2
Vic	91	98	7.7
Qld	65	67	3.1
SA	6	14	133.3
WA	22	3	-86.4
Tas	0	0	0.0
NT	5	1	-80.0
ACT	7	5	-28.6
Total	425	396	-6.8

a. Includes arrests by state/territory police and AFP.

NATIONAL IMPACT

While the number of cocaine seizures in Australia remained stable, there was a significant decrease in the weight of cocaine seized. Also notable was the absence of any sea cargo detections of cocaine. In the previous reporting period, one attempted sea cargo shipment accounted for 52 percent of the weight of cocaine border detections that year.

Seizures of cocaine in countries which have not traditionally been viewed as having cocaine markets may indicate a broadening of global cocaine markets or attempts to develop new cocaine shipment routes. This is further evidenced by the detection of two sizeable attempted importations of cocaine into Australia, embarking from China and Hong Kong.

Cocaine use remained relatively stable and it is likely that Sydney will remain the focal point for cocaine use in Australia. Border detections of cocaine suggest that Sydney is a major point of entry for cocaine into Australia and it is likely that this trend will continue with trafficking groups diversifying into a wider market outside of Sydney to other states and territories via established trafficking routes. This has already been evidenced in Queensland, with reports of increased cocaine availability in the southeast area of the state.

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