

# Heroin



## KEY POINTS

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- The weight of heroin detections at the Australian border in 2005–06 was at its lowest point in 10 years. However, the number of detections was the highest on record.
- Despite attempts to establish supply routes for Afghan heroin, South East Asia remained the predominant source for heroin in Australia.
- The number of heroin arrests continued to decline and accounted for less than three percent of all drug arrests in Australia.

## MAIN FORMS

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Heroin (diacetylmorphine) is a highly addictive morphine derivative obtained from the opium poppy *Papaver somniferum*. Heroin is a central nervous system depressant that slows nervous system functioning and has strong pain killing characteristics (AIC, 2005; NSW Department of Health, 2003). Opium, morphine and codeine are natural derivatives of the opium poppy.

Heroin is commonly administered through intravenous injection, however, it can be snorted or smoked. The purest form of heroin (No. 4 grade) is a white powder which is readily dissolved and injected. This form is typically seized in Australia. Less pure grades include 'brown rock' or No. 3, which can be heated and the vapours inhaled. Unrefined heroin is referred to as 'heroin base', or No.1, and is rarely encountered in Australia. The colour variations in heroin powder generally result from impurities which have not been fully removed during the refinement process (NDIC, 2003). 'Homebake heroin' is a crude form of heroin which is made from codeine-based pharmaceuticals.

## INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

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The primary source of heroin imported into Australia was the Golden Triangle region of South East Asia. However, some domestic seizures indicate that Australia may also be developing as a target for Afghan heroin. Opium production in the Golden Triangle remained in decline with national eradication plans continuing in Myanmar and Laos. Despite an overall national decline in Myanmar, the southern Shan State doubled its opium production. The increase was partly due to additional rains and improved cultivation techniques (UNODC, 2005).

Afghanistan remained the primary global producer of illicit opium and now supplies approximately 92 percent of the world market (UNODC, 2006). In 2006, the Afghan opium harvest reached a record 6,100 tonnes, an increase from 4,100 tonnes in 2005. Afghanistan has recorded a 59 percent increase in land area used for opium cultivation, with southern provinces accounting for the majority of the increase. It is estimated that the 2006 Afghan opium harvest will exceed global consumption by 30 percent (UNODC, 2006). Opium production in other cultivation centres remained stable.

Global efforts to combat the heroin trade include the INCB's attempts to use the multilateral acetic anhydride tracking initiative (*Project Cohesion*) to control the diversion of chemicals used in heroin synthesis (INCB, 2006). In May 2006, the Afghan Ministries of the Interior and Counter Narcotics initiated a joint project with the UNODC aimed at countering the smuggling of illicit heroin precursor chemicals into Afghanistan.

Heroin use throughout Asia was steady and remained the drug of choice for those entering treatment centres in Hong Kong, Macao, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. Poly-drug use among users increased in the Asian region due to fluctuating availability and prices, forcing users to seek out drug alternatives (Devaney, Reid and Baldwin, 2006).

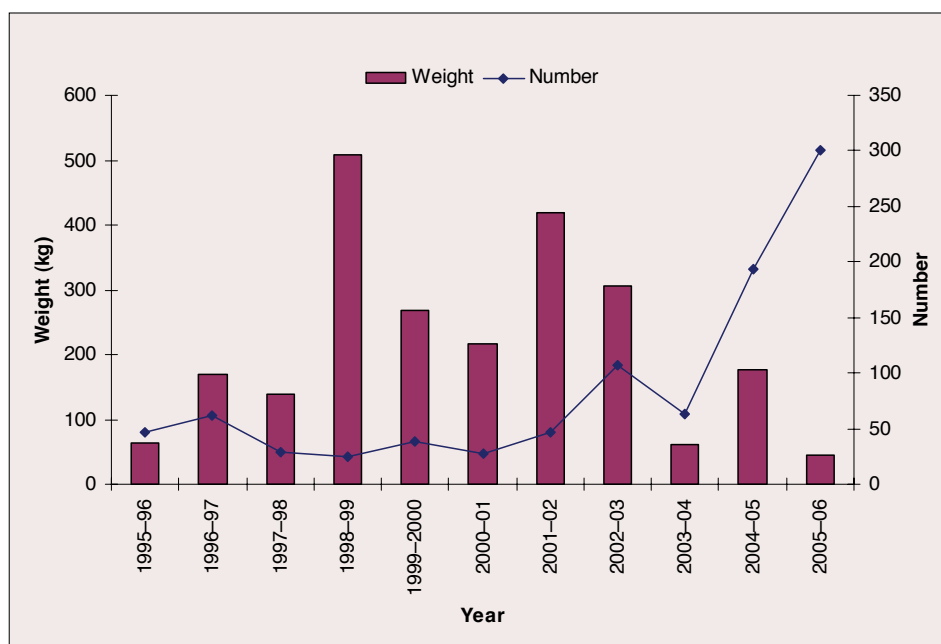
During the reporting period, the emergence of fentanyl-laced heroin was responsible for a large spike in fatal and non-fatal overdoses in some parts of the US. Fentanyl is a strong synthetic opiate analgesic, estimated to be 30–50 times stronger than heroin (DEA, 2006) and 200 times that of morphine (Reeves and Ginifer, 2002). Fentanyl was registered in Australia in 2002 for the management of cancer pain in patients who were tolerant to opioid therapies,<sup>7</sup> but due to its limited access, has been misused mostly by medical and paramedical personnel (Reeves and Ginifer, 2002). The US trend of fentanyl-laced heroin has not been detected in Australia.

## DOMESTIC TRENDS

### Australian border situation

The number of detections of heroin in 2005–06 was the highest annual number on record. However, the weight of heroin detected at the Australian border stood at its lowest point since 1995–96 (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Number and weight of detections of heroin at the Australian border, 1995–96 to 2005–06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)**

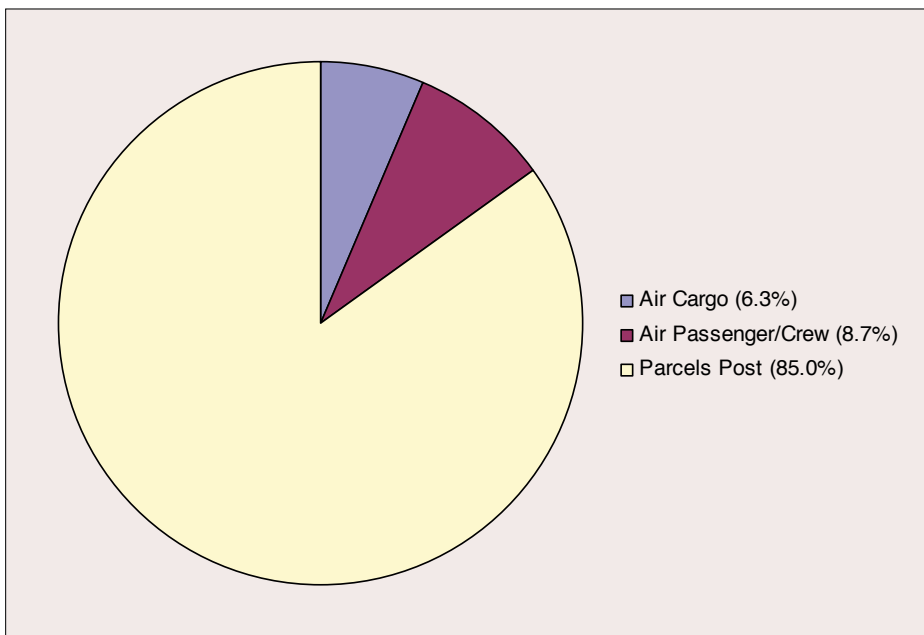


Border detections of heroin decreased in weight from 175.4 kilograms in 2004–05 to 45.6 kilograms in 2005–06 (a 74 percent decrease). The number of detections increased from 193 in 2004–05 to 300 in 2005–06 (a 55 percent increase), thus pointing to the increasing role of ‘scatter imports’ which involve a large number of small quantities of heroin sent through the post and in air cargo parcels (see Figures 15 and 16).

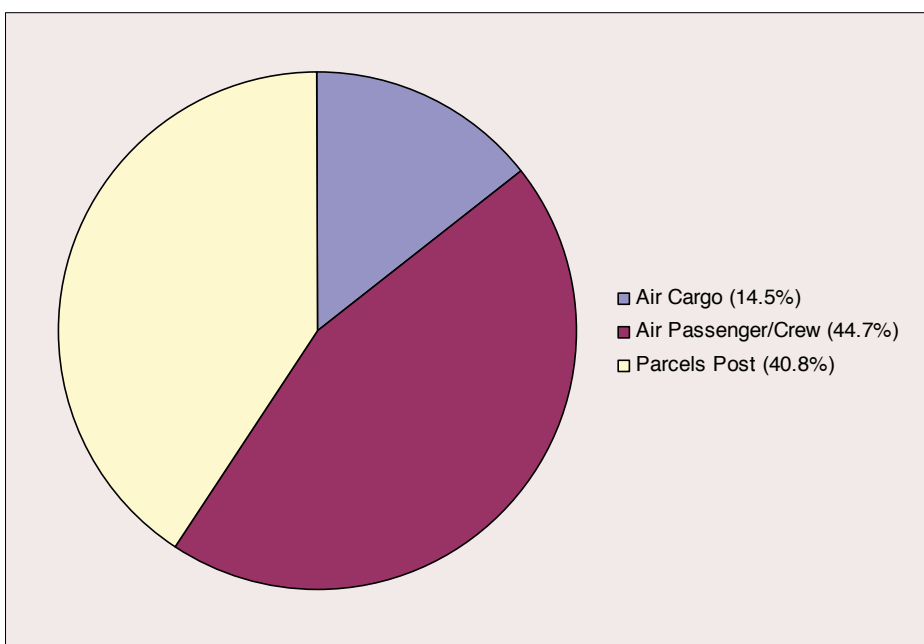
<sup>7</sup> Prior to its registration by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in November 2002, fentanyl was available in Australia via the Special Access Scheme.

Criminal syndicates arranging heroin importations to Australia are no longer commodity specific and readily involve themselves in similar importations of other drugs. It is noted that the publicity on recent cases of Australians arrested abroad while carrying heroin, tried and sentenced to death, did not deter air passenger couriers, who regularly carried large amounts of heroin to Australia from or through one or more capital punishment jurisdictions in the Asian region. While most of Australia's heroin originated in South East Asia, Customs detected criminal attempts to establish an alternative supply of heroin imported from South West Asia. This heroin was refined in the South West Asian region from opium produced in Afghanistan.

**Figure 15: Number of detections of heroin at the Australian border, by method of importation, 2005-06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)**



**Figure 16: Weight of detections of heroin at the Australian border, by method of importation, 2005-06 (Source: Australian Customs Service)**



## Significant border detections

Significant border detections of heroin in 2005–06 included:

- 2.6 kilograms of heroin detected on 28 February 2006 in the luggage of an air passenger who travelled from Vietnam via Singapore to Perth;
- 2.2 kilograms of heroin detected on 11 July 2005 concealed in a suitcase carried by an air passenger who flew directly from Vietnam to Sydney;
- 2.2 kilograms of heroin detected on 24 May 2006 concealed in a food item in the luggage of an air passenger who travelled from Cambodia via Singapore to Adelaide;
- 2.1 kilograms of heroin was detected in an identical concealment carried in the luggage of an air passenger who travelled to Brisbane from Cambodia via Singapore on 1 March 2006;
- Twenty-nine multi-hundred gram consignments of heroin ranging from 200 grams to over 1.6 kilograms, a total of nearly 14 kilograms of heroin, detected between 14 September 2005 and 28 June 2006 in postal articles and air cargo parcels at Sydney; and
- A total of 164 envelopes with 12–67 grams of heroin in each, a total of nearly 8 kilograms of heroin, all posted from India and considered the work of one trafficking syndicate, detected at Sydney in April and May 2006.

## Importation methods

The most commonly detected method of heroin importation in 2005–06 (by number) was in postal articles. The longest series of postal articles detected containing heroin comprised of 164 envelopes from India, with a total detected weight of nearly eight kilograms, illustrating the potential capacity of 'scatter import' ventures.

Heroin was imported by opportunistic ventures using mostly air passenger couriers from Vietnam and Cambodia and professional trafficking syndicates, most of them Asian and West African, importing significant aggregate amounts of heroin through the 'scatter imports' strategy of many small importations in air cargo and postal articles.

It is noted that while they were originally established by Asian and West African (mainly Nigerian) criminals, heroin importing syndicates were neither commodity specific nor strongly ethno-specific. Groups readily imported drugs other than heroin, particularly cocaine, and equally readily associated with criminals outside their own ethnic group. They commonly recruited couriers ethnically unrelated to the organisers.

Additionally, some of the lesser organised and opportunistic attempts to import heroin were conducted by Australian-Vietnamese and Australian-Cambodians attempting to source heroin from Vietnam and Cambodia. This activity was highly vulnerable to detection at Australian airports, and also carried a high risk of detection at departure points and intermediate airports in the region.

## Embarkation points

Embarkation points for shipments of heroin over 100 grams were, in weight order: Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Thailand, Singapore, Nigeria, Malaysia, Turkey, Pakistan, Canada, South Africa, Belgium, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates and the US.

While the majority of larger shipments were clearly still sourced from South-East Asia, the ventures attempting to import suspected South-West Asian (mainly Afghan) heroin to Australia continue to appear from origins such as India, Nigeria, Turkey, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and the United Arab Emirates. As an illustration of the scale of 'scatter import' schemes, 184 out of the 220 detections of heroin which were below 100 grams (typical for postal articles) originated in India.

## DOMESTIC MARKET INDICATORS

### Price

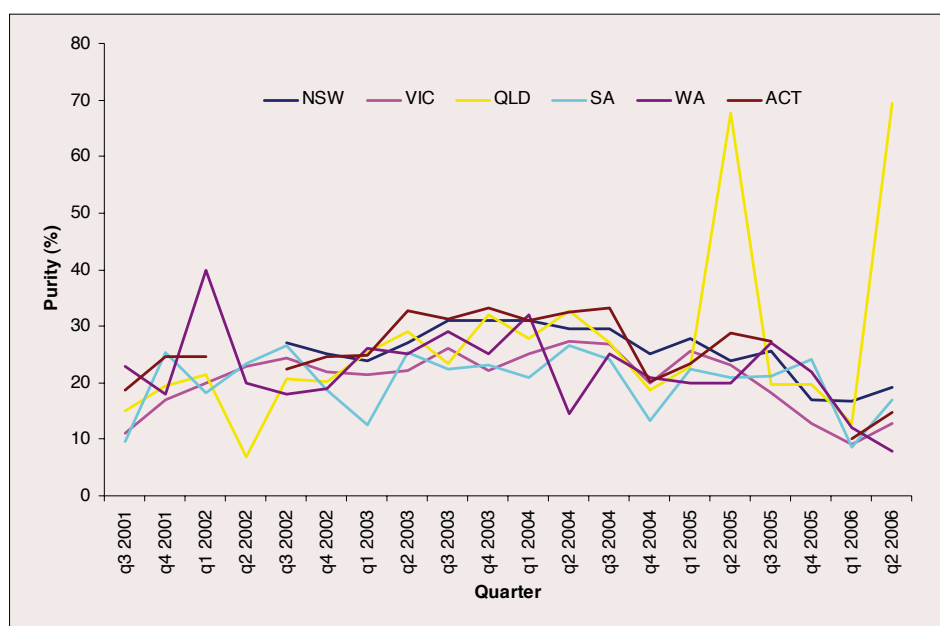
All states and territories, except Tasmania and the Northern Territory, reported prices for heroin during the reporting period. The price of one gram in Western Australia was between \$500 to \$600, remaining consistent with the previous year's prices. In New South Wales the price for one gram also remained relatively consistent at \$250 to \$450. Queensland reported a decrease from \$500 in 2004–05 to \$400 a gram in 2005–06. Victoria reported prices starting at \$270 per gram.

The price of an ounce (approximately 28 grams) in Western Australia was between \$10,000 and \$12,000, making it the most expensive state. The Australian Capital Territory reported the cheapest price for one ounce, with prices ranging between \$5,500 and \$6,000.

### Purity

Figure 17 shows median purity of heroin samples forensically analysed since 2001. An overall decrease in heroin purity levels have been observed since 1999, with median levels generally not reaching the levels reported prior to this time. The exception is Queensland, with purity levels noticeably fluctuating during the second quarters of 2005 and 2006.

Figure 17: Median purity of heroin samples, 2001–02 to 2005–06



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

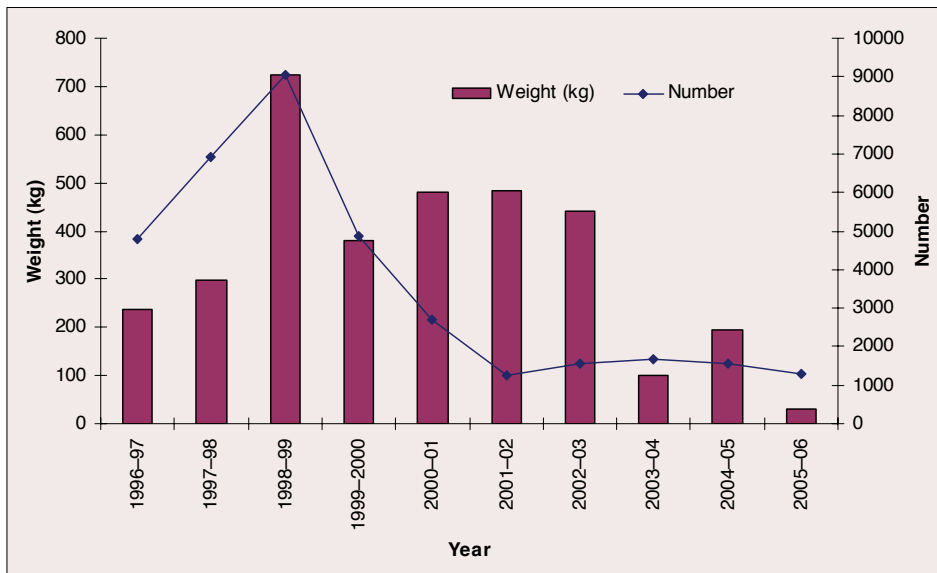
## Availability

Supply conditions are influenced by opium cultivation in source countries and the costs associated with trafficking heroin (Morrison, 2003). According to a 2006 NDARC survey of injecting drug users, the majority of respondents reported that heroin was 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain in most jurisdictions (NDARC, 2006). Research conducted on drug use by police detainees in 2005 illustrated a decline in the proportion of persons testing positive to heroin when compared to 2004 research (Mouzos, Smith and Hind, 2006).

## Seizures and arrests

The number and weight of heroin seizures declined when compared with 2004–05 figures (see Figure 18) and represented the lowest weight seized since 1996–97. As shown in Table 11, the number of seizures declined in all states and territories, except in South Australia and Tasmania, where they remained stable from the previous year. With the exception of Western Australia, most states reported a significant decrease in the weight seized.

**Figure 18: National heroin seizures, by weight and number, 1996–97 to 2005–06**



**Table 11: Number, weight and percentage change of national heroin seizures, 2004–05 and 2005–06**

State/territory <sup>a</sup>	Number			Weight (grams)		
	2004–05	2005–06	% change	2004–05	2005–06	% change
NSW	757	745	-1.6	68,260	16,294	-76.1
Vic	327	159	-51.4	12,661	3,264	-74.2
Qld	244	174	-28.7	3,333	3,183	-4.5
SA	43	62	44.2	106,784	2,914	-97.3
WA	146	128	-12.3	3,113	3,833	23.1
Tas	1	1	0.0	0	2	–
NT	3	1	-66.7	20	2	-90.0
ACT	33	28	-15.2	84	39	-53.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,554</b>	<b>1,298</b>	<b>-16.5</b>	<b>194,255</b>	<b>29,531</b>	<b>-84.8</b>

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

The number of heroin arrests has declined by almost one-third since 2004–05 (see Table 12). There has been a decreasing trend in heroin arrests over the last eight years. For example, in 1998–99, heroin arrests accounted for around 17 percent of all drug arrests in Australia. In 2005–06, this fell to less than three percent of all drug arrests. Only Tasmania and South Australia reported increases in arrest numbers when compared with the previous year.

**Table 12: Number and percentage change of national heroin arrests, 2004–05 and 2005–06**

State/ territory <sup>a</sup>	Arrests		
	2004–05	2005–06	% change
NSW	849	633	-25.4
Vic	1,928	1,159	-39.9
Qld	324	255	-21.3
SA	35	50	42.9
WA	121	108	-10.7
Tas	10	16	60.0
NT	2	0	-100.0
ACT	35	28	-20.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,304</b>	<b>2,249</b>	<b>-31.9</b>

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

## NATIONAL IMPACT

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The number of heroin detections at the Australian border is the highest on record, however, the weight of border detections has declined to its lowest point in 10 years. The decrease in seizure weight, use and arrest statistics may be contributed to the increased consumption of ATS in Australia, the involvement of heroin trafficking groups diversifying into other drug markets and lower opium crop yields in the South East Asia region. Despite an increase in availability of Afghan heroin and indications of attempts to establish an alternative source from that region, the predominant source of Australian heroin is likely to remain South East Asia in the short term.

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