

A natural experiment in Australia can be seen as a test of what might happen if **police and customs** succeed in dramatically reducing heroin supplies in a country with what up till then was a thriving heroin market patronised by an established population of heroin addicts. Enforcement successes may indeed have contributed to the heroin drought experienced in Australia after Christmas 2000, when the price of heroin rose sharply as purity and availability fell.¹² The result was that in Sydney's main drug market (the Cabramatta district) gram-quantity buyers found themselves paying over twice as much for pure heroin. Heroin arrests and drug tests on people arrested locally indicated that many users had responded by dropping out of the heroin market, while interviews with those who persisted showed they used less often and had cut their spending on heroin. Because of the drop in purity, they will also have used less heroin on each occasion. Fewer users and less use seem the most likely explanations for a sharp drop in the number of heroin overdoses in the same area and in New South Wales as a whole. Confirming this theory, in earlier years the reverse relationship had been noted – a rise in heroin-related deaths in Cabramatta and Sydney as heroin purity levels rose, and in Australia as a whole as increased availability of cheap and relatively pure heroin enticed new users into the market. However, there was a downside to the drought. Most users who experienced heroin shortages responded by increasing their use of other drugs, notably cocaine and benzodiazepines. The net result appears to have been no reduction in the crimes most closely related to drug use and instead a transitory increase in robbery and in breaking and entering in the months following the start of the drought.

LINKS Nuggette p. 15 issue 6
• [Overdosing on opiates.](#)
[Part I: causes](#), issue 4.

1 Weatherburn D. *et al.* "Supply control and harm reduction: lessons from the Australian heroin 'drought'." *Addiction*: 2003, 98, p. 83–91.

2 Day C. *et al.* "Decreased heroin availability in Sydney in early 2001." *Addiction*: 2003, 98, p. 93–95.