



Research paper

Poly-drug trafficking: Estimating the scale, trends and harms at the Australian border

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ABSTRACT

Background: International drug law enforcement agencies have identified an apparent rise in high level drug traffickers choosing to deal in multiple different drugs. It is hypothesised that this may be a “deliberate modus operandi” and that the formation of “portfolios of trades” may make such traffickers more profitable, harmful and resilient to changes in drug supply and policing. In this paper we provide the first exploration of the extent, nature and harms of poly-drug trafficking at Australian borders.

Methods: Two different methods were used. First, we used Australian Federal Police (AFP) data on all commercial level seizures at the Australian border from 1999 to 2012 to identify the proportion of seizures that were poly-drug and trends over time. Second, we used unit-record data on a sub-set of 20 drug trafficking cases and linked-cases (defined as the original drug trafficking case and all other criminal cases that were connected via common offenders and/or suspects) to compare the profiles of poly-drug and mono-drug traffickers, including: the total weight and type of drug seized, the value of assets seized, and the level of involvement in other crime (such as money laundering and corruption). **Results:** Between 5% and 35% of commercial importations at the Australian border involved poly-drug trafficking. Poly-drug trafficking occurred in almost every year of analysis (1999–2012), but it increased only slightly over time. Compared to mono-drug traffickers poly-drug traffickers were characterised by: larger quantities of drugs seized, larger networks, longer criminal histories and more involvement in other types of serious crime.

Conclusion: Some fears about poly-drug traffickers may have been overstated particularly about the inherent escalation of this form of trafficking. Nevertheless, this suggests poly-drug traffickers are likely to pose added risks to governments and law enforcement than mono-drug traffickers. They may necessitate different types of policy responses.

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Introduction

In recent years, international drug law enforcement agencies have reported increases in (high level) poly-drug trafficking: the trafficking of more than one illicit drug type by the same group (EMCDDA, 2014; Europol, 2011, 2013; National Drug Intelligence Center, 2012; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014a). For example, the 2011 EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment noted that: “(D)rug trafficking to and within the EU is increasingly controlled by groups dealing in more than one drug to maximise

profits” (Europol, 2011, p. 10). Two years later the 2013 EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment reported that poly-drug trafficking was no longer “just a trend” but instead a “common” occurrence that constituted a key threat to law enforcement and the community (Europol, 2013, p. 19). It has been conjectured that becoming a poly-drug trafficker may be a “deliberate modus operandi”; that the formation of “portfolios of trades” may make such traffickers more profitable, harmful and resilient to changes in drug supply and drug law enforcement (Europol, 2013; National Drug Intelligence Center, 2012; Rubin, Pardal, McGee, & Culley, 2013). There are added concerns that poly-drug traffickers will also be more inclined to deal in multiple commodities (e.g., drugs, money, firearms) and hence be both poly-drug and poly-crime (Rubin et al., 2013). Yet, for a range of reasons, both methodological and conceptual, the extent and nature of poly-drug trafficking is not well understood.

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The business of high level drug trafficking has been subject to a growing body of research. This research has revealed the business acumen, adaptability and inherent resilience of drug market players. Key reasons for such traits include the multiple risk management strategies that traffickers employ to avoid detection, guarantee cash flow and ensure an ongoing source of supply (Decker & Chapman, 2008; Dorn, Levi, & King, 2005; Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001), and trafficker's willingness to change their modes of doing business (Bouchard, 2007; Bright & Delaney, 2013; Bright, Hughes, & Chalmers, 2012; Carley, 2006; Desroches, 2005; Dorn et al., 2005; Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007; Reuter & Haaga, 1989). But, research documenting trends in drug trafficking tends to be segregated by drug type e.g. ecstasy versus cocaine (Australian Crime Commission, 2014; EMCDDA and Europol, 2013; Europol, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014b). Similarly, even when drug traffickers are noted to be involved in multiple drugs e.g. cocaine and ecstasy, research into drug trafficking behaviour tends to focus on the main drug that a group is involved in e.g. cocaine (see for example McKetin, McLaren, & Kelly, 2005; Shearer, Johnston, Kaye, Dillon, & Collins, 2005; Soudijn & Reuter, 2013; Zaitch, 2002). While there may be well justified reasons for this, including reasons of practicality and that this is how drug law enforcement data are published; such a lens obscures traffickers who trade in multiple drugs. It means that while many studies have noted the existence of traffickers who trade in multiple drugs (see for example Fowler, Kinner, & Krenske, 2007), few have systematically examined the extent, nature, harms or implications thereof (Rubin et al., 2013). The lack of attention to this issue is of increasing concern given the law enforcement attention and conjecture. There are also some very real reasons why poly-drug trafficking could be increasing including globalisation and the opening of trade routes and transportation hubs (Europol, 2013; Morselli, Turcotte, & Tenti, 2011; von Lampe, 2012), or to circumvent worldwide challenges in maintaining supply (Rubin et al., 2013). For example, the largest study of imprisoned drug traffickers showed that the biggest determinant of success in growth in drug trafficking was trafficker's ability to identify and secure alternate source(s) of supply of drugs (such as through use of multiple suppliers) (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007), and it is conjectured that an alternate but related strategy may be expanding the repertoire of products: particularly to deal in multiple illicit drugs or multiple illicit commodities (Rubin et al., 2013).

In this paper we provide the first exploration of the extent, nature and potential harms of poly-drug trafficking at Australian borders. We define mono-drug traffickers as traffickers who produce or trade in one drug/precursor e.g. cocaine alone. In contrast, poly-drug traffickers are traffickers who produce and/or trade in more than one drug/precursor e.g. methamphetamine and cocaine. Rubin et al. (2013, p. 43) draw the distinction between poly-drug trafficking that involves diversity (co-occurrence e.g. traffickers importing heroin and MDMA at the same/similar times) and diversification (change over time e.g. traffickers switching or substituting from importing heroin to MDMA alone). We use a number of different measures in the goal of capturing both diversity and diversification.

Existing estimates of the scale and nature of poly-drug trafficking

In spite of the increased law enforcement attention to poly-drug trafficking there remain few publically available estimates of the scale or nature of poly-drug trafficking. For example, while the 2013 Organised Crime Threat Assessment Europol reported that poly-drug trafficking was common (Europol, 2013), what

common meant was not clear: nor on what basis such an assertion had been derived. This is equally true of other law enforcement accounts.

The academic literature includes a number of estimates of the extent of poly-drug trafficking; largely derived from samples of imprisoned drug traffickers. The UK MATRIX study found 32.6% of their sample of 222 high level traffickers who had been convicted and imprisoned in the UK (primarily importers and wholesale distributors) reported operating in more than one drug (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). Of the poly-drug traffickers, the majority dealt in heroin and cocaine (41%). Fifteen per cent dealt in three or four different drugs. Another UK study, of 70 middle market drug traffickers (defined as those involved between bulk importation traffickers/wholesalers and retail level dealers) found 38% were involved in dealing more than one drug (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001). Of the poly-drug dealers, the bulk of these were buying and selling 'dance drugs': amphetamine and ecstasy (39%) or amphetamine, ecstasy and cocaine (29%). Finally, a Canadian study by Malm and Bichler (2011) of 1998 drug traffickers involved in production, transport, supply and retail sale (over the period 2002–2006) found that 43% were poly-drug traffickers and that the main combination involved cocaine and cannabis (26%). In summary, the international studies suggest that up to 43% of mid to high level trafficking may be poly-drug; but that the scale and nature of poly-drug trafficking may vary between contexts and/or times.

Notably, there are limitations with all such studies. To date the principal source that has been employed is interviews with drug traffickers (Desroches, 2005; Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001; Reuter & Haaga, 1989). Limitations of these are many including that it employs convenience samples that are not random or representative of all traffickers and that the information obtained is based on self-report (and hence is vulnerable to response bias, poor memory or lying) (Weatherburn, 2011). Furthermore, the studies have not distinguished between diversity and diversification: that is whether poly-drug trafficking was a deliberate choice to trade in multiple drugs at the same time or a temporary and perhaps reactionary change e.g. substitution in response to shortage of a particular product. These two motivations for poly-drug trafficking may carry very different implications for police and other stakeholders.

To date, law enforcement and criminal justice data have not been examined, with one exception; law enforcement seizure data has been cited (in ad hoc fashion) as evidence of the existence of poly-drug trafficking including through "co-shipments" of methamphetamine and heroin at the time of the Australian heroin shortage (see for example Degenhardt, Day, & Hall, 2004). While cognisant that reliance on law enforcement and criminal justice data has its own challenges, including that such data is limited to details of crimes detected (Weatherburn, 2011) we perceive law enforcement data to be an essential first step in any analysis of poly-drug trafficking. This is because it is the only data source that can comprehensively capture trends over multiple years as well as multiple indices of offence and offender characteristics of poly-drug traffickers and a comparative group of mono-drug traffickers.

In this paper we used data from the Australian government's leading law enforcement agency (the Australian Federal Police) in order to provide the first detailed exploration of the extent, nature and potential harmfulness of poly-drug trafficking at the Australian border. The explicit goals of this paper were fourfold:

1. To estimate the proportion of high-level drug traffickers at Australian borders connected with importation of more than one type of illicit drug.
2. To identify trends in the extent and nature of poly-drug trafficking over the period 1999–2012.

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