



# Research in Practice

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## Decrease in use of ecstasy/MDMA

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### Key findings

- Recent data from the Australian Institute of Criminology's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program indicate a decrease in the use of ecstasy among police detainees. Specifically, only five percent of police detainees in 2010 (n=187) and 2011 (n=170) reported using ecstasy; 50 percent lower than in 2009 (n=428) when ecstasy use peaked at 11 percent.
- Self-report data also indicate that ecstasy was considered by users to be lower in quality and harder to obtain in 2011 compared with earlier years. Ecstasy users also reported a decrease in the number of people selling the drug.
- The decline in ecstasy use coincides with a reported increase in methamphetamine use (Macgregor and Payne 2011) and the findings are consistent with data recently released by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (Sindicich & Burns 2011) and in the 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) report (AIHW 2011).

### What is DUMA?

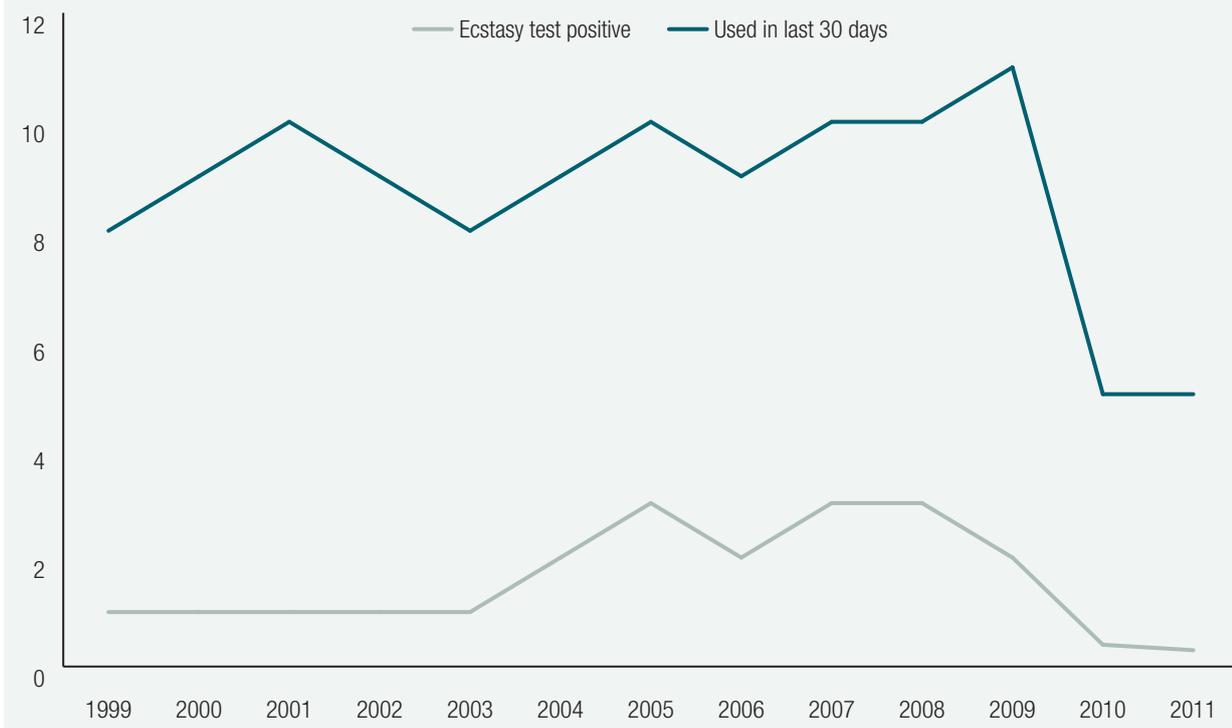
Commencing at the AIC in 1999, the DUMA program is Australia's largest and longest running data collection system on drugs and offending and captures information on more than 4,000 alleged offenders (not yet convicted) each year across nine locations throughout the country. DUMA currently operates from sites in New South Wales (Bankstown, Parramatta and Kings Cross), Queensland (Southport and Brisbane), Western Australia (East Perth), South Australia (Adelaide) Victoria (Footscray) and the Northern Territory (Darwin) and is comprised of a two-staged methodology using an interviewer-administered self-report survey, followed by voluntary urinalysis. DUMA is unique in this regard, with urinalysis providing a reliable and objective measure of the prevalence of very recent drug use among the police detainee sample. Regular analysis of DUMA data facilitates ongoing monitoring of drug use rates, including the timely provision of data to local law enforcement, health and criminal justice practitioners. For further information about the DUMA program see Gaffney et al. (2010).

### Results

Between 1999 and 2011, DUMA program staff had completed a comprehensive self-report survey with more than 43,000 adult police detainees. Of these, 78 percent (n=33,547) also voluntarily provided a urine sample which was later tested for a range of different drug classes, including ecstasy (MDMA). Combined, the self-report survey and urinalysis data provide a comprehensive and unique set of indicators for trends in ecstasy use among police detainees.

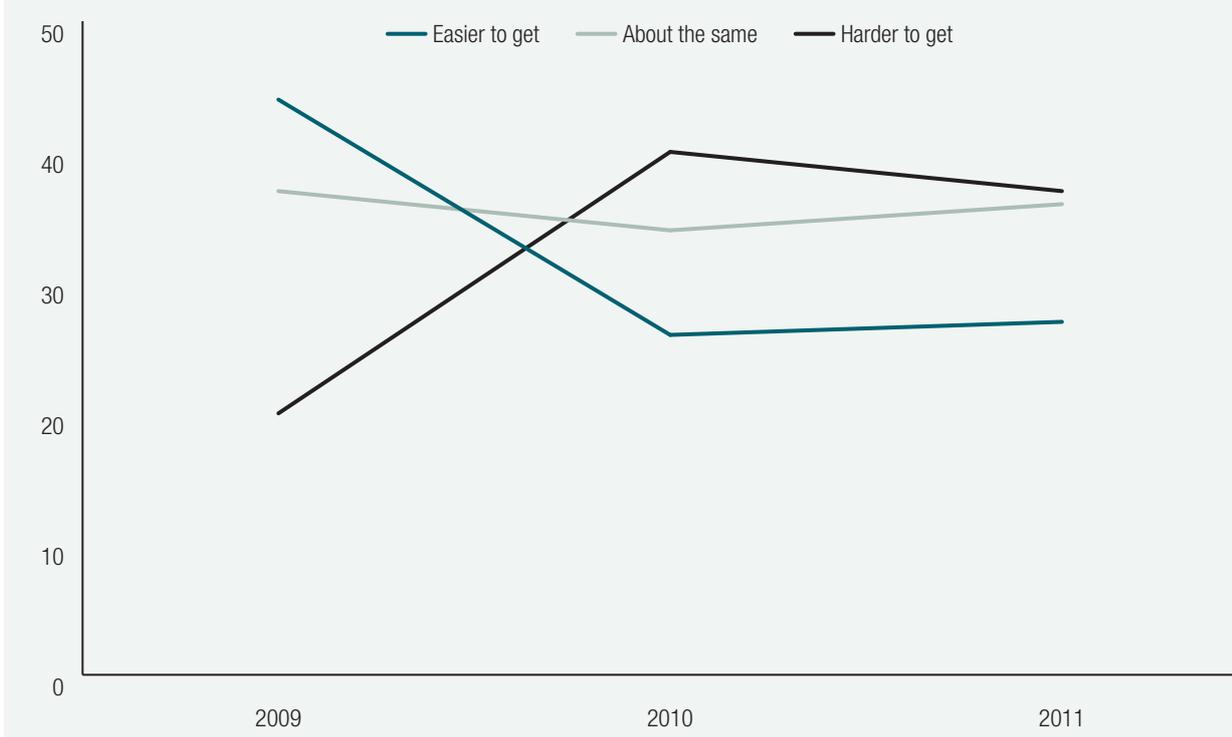
Annual data, aggregated across all current sites, showed that self-reported ecstasy use in the 30 days prior to testing fell substantially in 2010 (n=187) and 2011 (n=170) to five percent—a 50 percent fall from 11 percent (n=428) in 2009 (see Figure 1). Although relatively few detainees have tested positive to ecstasy generally, the urinalysis results nevertheless showed a similar trend, with test positive rates in 2011 reaching their lowest since data on ecstasy was first collected. Again, these urinalysis data should be interpreted with caution given the small number of detainees testing positive to ecstasy in any one year.

**Figure 1** Proportion of detainees who recently used and tested positive to ecstasy, 1999–2011



Source: AIC DUMA collection 1999–2011 [computer file]

**Figure 2** Changes in the perceived level of ease in obtaining ecstasy, 2009–11



Note: Percentages in each year may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC DUMA collection 1999–2011 [computer file]

In addition, DUMA interviewers also collect a range of key drug market data indicators in an effort to better understand the nature and context of local drug markets. The first of these seeks to measure the extent to which detainees perceive changes in the availability of ecstasy by asking how easy it is to obtain now compared with three months ago.

The proportion of detainees who reported that ecstasy was ‘easier to get’ decreased substantially from 44 percent in 2009 to 26 percent in 2010, whereas the proportion who said it was ‘harder to get’ doubled between 2009 and 2010 from 20 percent to 40 percent, then remained relatively stable between 2010 and 2011 (see Figure 2). The proportion of detainees who

reported that the availability of ecstasy was ‘about the same’ generally remained stable between 2009 to 2011. Overall, these data indicate a bias towards a generalised decrease in the availability of ecstasy because not only are fewer detainees in 2010 and 2011 reporting that ecstasy is easier to get, but substantially more have reported difficulty in obtaining it (see Figure 2).

Detainees were also asked if the number of people selling ecstasy had changed over the past three months. The results indicated that in 2010 and 2011, a larger proportion of detainees believed that there were fewer dealers selling the drug than was reported in 2009. Specifically, in 2009, just over half of all ecstasy users (54%) believed that the number of people selling the drug had ‘increased’ recently; this declined substantially to 28 percent in 2010.

By the end of 2011 this figure has risen to 35 percent, although this is due to a decrease in the proportion of detainees reporting that the number of people selling ecstasy stayed the same. On the other hand, significantly more detainees reported that the number of people selling ecstasy had ‘decreased’ recently—28 percent in 2010 and 34 percent in 2011, up from nine percent in 2009 (see Figure 3).

Finally, police detainees who used ecstasy were asked whether the quality of ecstasy had changed in the previous three months. Overall, while the proportion of ecstasy users who believed that the quality of ecstasy had increased stayed constant throughout the three years, there was an increase in the proportion who

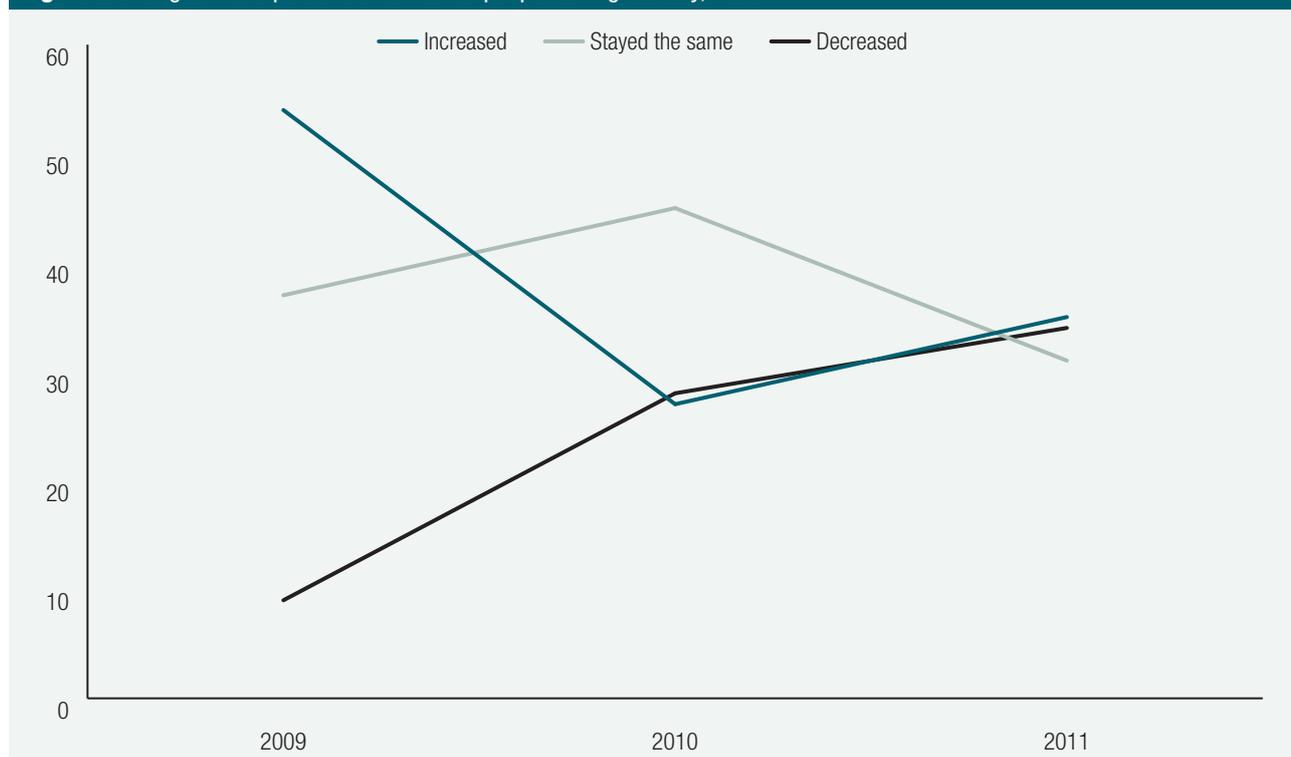
believed the quality had declined (49% in 2011, up from 35 percent in 2009) and a decrease in the proportion who thought that the quality had ‘stayed the same’ (23 percent in 2011, down from 37 percent in 2009) (see Figure 4).

## Discussion

The AIC analysed self-report drug use and drug market data from a sample of police detainees interviewed as part of the DUMA program. An examination of the trend data revealed that after reaching a peak of 11 percent in 2009 (n=428), the prevalence of recent ecstasy use among police detainees has since halved—down to five percent in both 2010 (n=187) and 2011 (n=170). Self-reported data suggested that ecstasy had become harder to obtain, that there were fewer dealers selling the drug and that the quality was perceived to have declined.

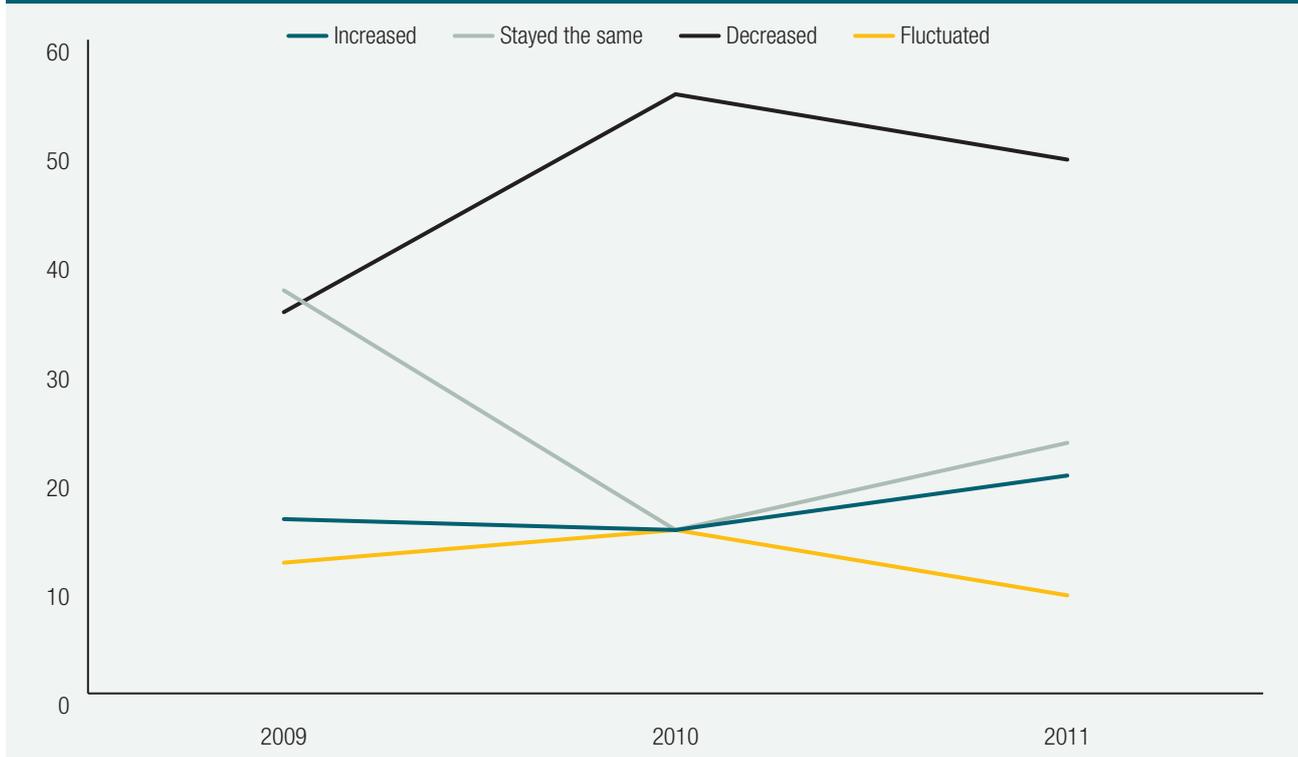
These new findings are consistent with recently released data from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), which found that among a sample of regular ecstasy users the proportion who reported ecstasy as their preferred drug of choice declined significantly from 42 percent in 2009 to 27 percent in 2011 (Sindicich & Burns 2011). The NDARC study also reported that regular ecstasy users who nominated ecstasy as their preferred drug but used another drug more often in the past month did so mainly because of the lack of availability and low purity of ecstasy. The DUMA findings reported here are also consistent with findings from the 2010 National

**Figure 3** Changes in the perceived number of people selling ecstasy, 2009–11



Source: AIC DUMA collection 1999–2011 [computer file]

**Figure 4** Changes in the perceived quality of ecstasy, 2009–11



Note: Percentages in each year may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC DUMA collection 1999–2011 [computer file]

Drug Strategy Household Survey which showed a significant decline in the use of ecstasy among the general population between 2007 to 2010 (from 3.5% to 3%), a reduction of 50,000 people using ecstasy in 2010, after having been increasing steadily since 1995 (AIHW 2011). The availability of, and opportunity to use ecstasy also declined during this period, falling from 8.1 percent in 2007 to 7.2 percent in 2010 (AIHW 2011).

The factors underpinning the decline in ecstasy use are likely to be complex, although there have been suggestions of a recent reduction in the supply of ecstasy, resulting from difficulties in obtaining the chemicals used in ecstasy (MDMA) production (Styles 2011). The probable consequences of a supply shortage are equally complex, although it is worthwhile noting that these substantial falls in ecstasy use among police detainees have occurred simultaneously with significant increases in methamphetamine use (Macgregor and Payne 2011). The relationship between the production and supply of ecstasy and methamphetamine, but more importantly how users respond to such market changes, remains a key topic for further research.

## References

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