



Research Note 1: Benchmarking heroin seizures

Summary

A comparison of heroin seizure rates between the AFP and North American and European nations was based upon the number of kilograms seized per million persons of populations. The AFP's seizure rate increased from 5.6 in 1996 to 27.8 in 1998. The AFP improved its relative ranking from 13th of 18 nations in 1996 to 2nd in 1998. This is one measure of the relative efficiency of the AFP in disrupting the importation of heroin into Australia.

Aim

The benchmarking of police work across enforcement agencies is not a simple matter as the dearth of published reports confirms. This paper is the first to attempt to benchmark AFP performance against overseas agencies. It is intended to report results every second year from 1996. These comparisons reflect the AFP's commitment to performance reporting and benchmarking as part of initiatives to maintain a culture of continuous improvement.

International benchmarking is most easily achieved where organisations are operating in similar environments with similar products, so that benchmarking studies tend to proliferate in areas such as the manufacturing industry. Law enforcement agencies do not fit this mould because the social and legislative environment can vary widely from country to country, and countries differ in the way they organise and administer justice.

Comparisons are made easier by narrowing the subject of the comparison and by limiting benchmarking to countries of comparable economy and culture. Even so, difficulties of interpretation remain. First, it is important to recognise that the AFP's federal role mainly relates to the importation or exportation of illicit drugs (with the former being of far greater significance) rather than trafficking or possession.

Second, it should be noted that AFP seizures are often made in co-operation with other agencies, particularly the Australian Customs Service. The results reported herein reflect the results of this co-operation. The same is true of the majority of overseas agencies - their seizure figures also include co-operative efforts with other agencies.

Methodology

The simplest form of evaluation would be to compare the total quantity of heroin and cocaine seized by each agency over the five-year period.

Such a comparison would be confounded by differences in the total population and the drug user population in particular. Probably, the best indicator of success is the proportion of total illicit drugs imported that is intercepted by the law enforcement agency. Unfortunately, estimates of total importations are difficult to establish.

As a broad generalisation, one could suggest that the total amount of illicit drugs consumed is roughly proportionate to the population of a country. There are obvious objections to this assumption but as a tentative first step at international comparisons it was used in the current analysis.

On that basis, the current paper compared the amount of illicit substance seized per 1,000,000 persons of population users:

$$\text{Seizure rate} = \frac{1,000,000 * (\text{Kilograms seized})}{(\text{Resident population})}$$

This formula provides a uniform basis of comparison among nations or groups of nations. The formula assumes that countries with larger resident populations are likely to have a greater number of drug users. This can only be true within certain limits. The countries included in the current study share a common cultural heritage so there are some grounds for maintaining that underlying assumption is approximately true in the present case.

Nevertheless, the results should be taken as broadly indicative of trends and general performance rankings rather than as reflecting a precise grading of law enforcement efforts. A number of other factors will also impinge upon results. For example, some countries included in the study are transit points for illicit substances destined elsewhere. The Netherlands is a notable example. Other nations, such as Australia, are in all likelihood the final destination for illicit drugs reaching their borders.

Table 1 Heroin seizure rate 1996, 1998*

| | 1996 | 1998 |
|----------------|------|-------|
| AFP | 5.6 | 27.8 |
| Canada | 2.8 | 3.4 |
| USA | 5.8 | 5.9 |
| Austria | 10.1 | 14.6 |
| Belgium | 13.1 | 7.4 |
| Denmark | 11.6 | 10.4 |
| Finland | 1.2 | 0.4 |
| France | 10.6 | 5.8 |
| Germany | 11.0 | 8.3 |
| Greece | 18.1 | 17.5 |
| Ireland | 3.0 | 10.2 |
| Italy | 22.1 | 12.2 |
| Luxembourg | 7.2 | 9.4 |
| Netherlands | 33.2 | 131.9 |
| Portugal | 4.7 | 9.7 |
| Spain | 13.5 | 10.5 |
| Sweden | 2.9 | 8.0 |
| United Kingdom | 18.2 | 22.8 |
| European Union | 14.6 | 16.5 |
| World | 4.9 | 5.7 |

*Kilograms of heroin seized per million residents.

Data

Population figures for 1996 and 1998 were derived from the United Nations and rounded to thousands. Drug seizure data were derived from various sources.

The 1998 BJS Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics provided drug seizures for the USA in pounds. These were converted to kilograms. Canadian figures were provided by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Statistical attachments to the 2000 Annual Report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union provided data on drug seizures for member states. The report was produced by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Estimates of global seizures were provided by the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

For Australia, drug seizure figures were retrieved from the AFP's database. Community policing seizures were excluded from the analysis. It is important to note the nature of the comparisons undertaken. The AFP figures relate to seizures made singly or jointly by the AFP while figures for all other nations relate to all seizures by any agency in that country.

Results

Table 1 has heroin seizure rates for the AFP, USA, Canada, EU and the world. Charts 1 and 2 provide this information for 1996 and 1998 in rank order from highest to lowest seizure rate.

From 1996 to 1998, there were modest increases in the per capita seizure rate globally (from 4.9 to 5.7 kilograms) and in the European Union (14.6 to 16.5). During the same period, the seizure rate by the AFP increased significantly from 5.6 to 27.8.

In 1996, the AFP seizure rate was above the global average but below that for the EU. The AFP seizure rate ranked 13th of the 18 individual nations reported for that year. By 1998, the AFP had improved to second place and its seizure rate was above both the EU and global rate.

Chart 1. Heroin seizure rates 1996.

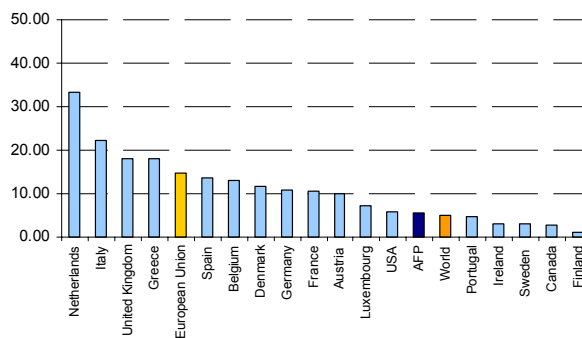
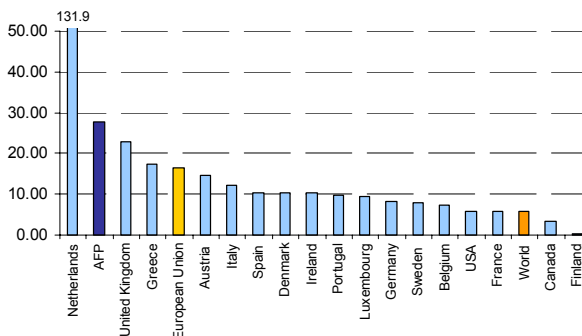


Chart 2. Heroin seizure rates 1998.



Note: Bar for the Netherlands exceeds the scale.

Conclusion

It must be remembered that this is a first attempt to compare the performance of law enforcement agencies in a number of countries and the results should be treated with caution. This performance measure relates to the seizure of importations of heroin. It does not measure, for example, the deterrence effect or disruption to criminal networks through prosecution of members or seizure of criminal assets. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the AFP along with its partners has greatly improved its performance in intercepting the importation of heroin in Australia.

The amount of heroin seized by the AFP per capita of population in 1996 was below the average reported by a number of other nations in this study. Between 1996 and 1998, nine overseas nations reported an increase in heroin seized and eight reported a decrease with the resulting modest improvement in the European Union and North America. By contrast, heroin seizures by the AFP increased markedly (fivefold) during this period placing Australia toward the top of the ranking in Chart 2.

These results should not be viewed in isolation. As noted earlier, this benchmarking reflects only one aspect of law enforcement efforts, i.e. seizures. Other aspects such as the disruption of organised crime and the deterrence of future importations are equally important in assessing the effectiveness of drug law enforcement. The current study represents a starting point in the complex and difficult area of comparing performance across police agencies. In the end, the value of such increased efficiency lies in the ensuing benefits to Australian society.