

Ice age

THE MCGOWAN GOVERNMENT HAS FAILED TO DELIVER ON ITS PROMISE TO FIGHT THE METH SCOURGE CURRENTLY SEEPING THROUGH WESTERN AUSTRALIA. BY KEVIN MCDONALD.

Like pretty much every other WA government policy of late, the focus on COVID-19 has drawn an impenetrable curtain across just about every issue of importance, including the facts surrounding the failure of the Methamphetamine Action Plan.

In recent times and to the overall benefit of our community, hard borders have single-handedly contributed to a reduced flow of meth into the state. But as restrictions are lifted, the problems will undoubtedly return.

The prevalence of the meth scourge in Western Australia had taken a firm foothold by the mid-noughties, gathered pace and has embedded itself in our community ever since. Unless government and police are open and transparent about their failures, as well as their successes, the community they are paid generous salaries to serve will unnecessarily suffer the consequences – and that is nowhere near good enough.

Research confirms that crime is a likely social consequence of methamphetamine use and efforts are needed to reduce this impact. In 2017 the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission reported that meth use accounted for 88.2% of illicit drugs used by WA residents, the highest percentage in the country, and Western Australia had rapidly and rightly earned a reputation for being the meth capital of Australia.

Despite large quantities of meth being seized by police, the research and data was confirming the availability of meth was surging in response to an ever-increasing demand. Meth addict numbers were growing, and mental health resources were stretched to breaking point. Other associated problems such as domestic violence, volume crime and random, unprovoked violent attacks on innocent people continued unabated.

In the leadup to the 2017 Western Australia election, WA Labor Party opposition leader Mark McGowan campaigned heavily that the Methamphetamine Action Plan (MAP) would reduce the supply and demand of meth across Western Australia and thereby minimise the harm being felt in the wider community.

Shortly following Labor's election win that year, new WA Police Commissioner Chris Dawson (who was incidentally at the helm of the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission before re-joining WA Police), was tasked to give effect to Labor's election promise.

As the next three years of the McGowan Labor government unfolded, nothing seemed to have improved despite some large meth seizures by WA Police. Metropolitan and regional suburbs were awash with meth, consumption rates remained atmospheric, unprovoked violent assaults continued and police efforts were having little impact.

Subsequently on 23 January 2020, three years after Labor took office and introduced their much-vaunted MAP, Commissioner Dawson gave a compelling television interview during which he made a stunning admission. He unequivocally, unambiguously announced their meth strategies had failed.

It was an important interview by Channel 9 journalist Michael Genovese, not just because of Commissioner Dawson's admission, but because since then, any further acknowledgment of the failure by police or government is, like a cop when you need one, very hard to find. In fact, you might otherwise believe that the war on meth was a success, given some of the messaging and rhetoric from the police and government.

A few months later during WA Parliamentary Budget Estimates, Police Minister Michelle Roberts, Commissioner Dawson and his Deputy Commissioners painted a very different picture putting a very positive spin on the war against meth. Opposition questions were typically brushed aside by self-congratulatory responses relating to large meth and cash seizures and successful operations into organised illicit drug networks. It was as though the television interview of only a few months before had never happened.

Like other government agency annual reports, the WA Police annual report is supposed to be a public record of accountability and a demonstration of sensible expenditure. And after all, the annual police budget of \$1.5 billion demands it.

Consistent with the government's responses during budget estimates, the 2019/2020 WA Police Annual Report failed to reveal anything about the meth strategy failure. Just more rhetoric about what a great job the police were doing seizing large amounts of meth and cash, arrests and prosecutions.

It begs the question why this critical failure is overlooked. Perhaps one reason is because WA Police have no measurements, goal setting or key performance indicators in place associated with illicit drug crime, like it does for all its other activities.

To bring some clarity to this mixed messaging, ACIC's National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program provides some accurate measurements that shed light on the extent of the meth problem in WA.

Wastewater testing at various metropolitan and regional sites by the NWDMP commenced around 2016 and facilitated the measuring of meth consumption quantities. NWDMP results

demonstrate a relatively consistent quantity of approximately 1.5 tonnes of meth per year being consumed in WA, during the 3-year period from 2016.

Naturally the WA Police can add up the amount of meth they seize and during this period, the amount of meth seized by law enforcement was roughly 300 kilograms annually (excluding a one off, single 1.3 tonne meth seizure in Geraldton in 2017).

As the consumption data from the NWDMP grew, clear questions emerged that have never been asked (or answered) by anyone. Questions that could potentially clarify how well, or how poorly, the war on meth was progressing. Put simply:

- What is the estimated total quantity of meth coming into WA each year?
- What percentage of total meth quantity is being intercepted by police each year?
- What is the residual percentage of total meth not being intercepted by police each year?

The first step to answer these questions is to combine the average consumption NWDMP amounts with total law enforcement seizures. With approximately 1,500 kilos consumed and 300 kilos seized, it follows that at least 1,800 kilos of Meth make its way into WA every year. This means WA Police are intercepting at best one sixth or 17% of meth coming into the state. Thus, law enforcement is missing a minimum of 83% of meth coming into WA but is this accurate?

This basic calculation would naturally exclude an undetermined amount being the quantity in the community, either not yet consumed and not yet seized by police. The next step would be to quantify that undetermined, not consumed, not seized amount.

To accurately speculate the undetermined meth quantity that is neither consumed, nor seized by police is inherently difficult. What can be said is that if there weren't residual amounts following consumption and interception, meth stocks would dry up instantly. There would be no more dealers, no more addicts, and nothing left to seize. A logical proposition is that an equal or greater amount of meth might be required to sustain ongoing consumption rates and seizure quantities. An equal amount seems reasonable given it is only speculative and better than not considering it at all.

Therefore, the annual consumed amount of 1.5 tonnes must be at least doubled to satisfy the quantity needed to sustain it i.e. 3 tonnes. So that means the total of meth coming into WA has now leapt to 3.3 tonnes and the percentage amount seized by law enforcement (300 kilos approximately) drops to below 10%.

Conversely, the WA Police is recurrently failing to intercept more than 90% of the total amount of meth coming into WA. And this status quo remains without a hint of change, refinement, or even acknowledgement of this failure – save for the TV interview in 2020. It also means that there is now a gauge that confirms without doubt the failure of the MAP to reduce the demand and supply of meth.

If a business with a niche market was achieving less than 10% of its potential, it would not be unreasonable to review that business model and come up with strategies to try to increase their market share, one might think.

The advent of wastewater testing and statistical measuring presents a unique opportunity for the WA Government and WA Police to review its failed strategies and consider how they could do things better – an opportunity they don't appear to have taken advantage of.

With a \$131 million 'Meth Action Plan' election promise, that had blown out to nearly \$250 million by 2020, coupled with an extraordinary three-wise-monkeys approach to public sector accountability, it's way beyond time the WA government and the WA Police were called to account, not only for the failure of the Meth Action Plan itself, but also for the relative non-disclosure of that failure.

This ongoing policy fiasco and undisclosed failure represents a massive let down of community confidence in the WA government and police, and a continuance of the incredible suffering the meth scourge imposes on the WA community.

On the ground, WA Police is doing all it believes it can to reduce the impacts of meth in our community. Frontline detectives, uniformed and support personnel work extremely hard, long hours and do great work. It's just that the MAP has let them and our community down year after year, without any real change to the approach or even formal acknowledgment that the strategies have failed.

In 2016-2018, as a detective sergeant attached to the WA Police Serious and Organised Crime Squad, I had a frontline, uninterrupted view of the MAP. Retiring from WA Police in 2018, I harboured a deep disappointment that the failures were not being recognised by senior police and were unlikely to change. I was scared the damage to our community would continue. I was briefly optimistic in 2020 when the Police Commissioner made his admissions on TV but sadly, that was the beginning and end of any faux acceptance of responsibility and all was conveniently forgotten.

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