



DRUG POLICY RESEARCH CENTER

Mixed Messages: Is Cocaine Consumption in the U.S. Going Up or Down?

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Take #1: Cocaine use is down (overdoses up due to opioids)



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Opioids are driving increase in cocaine overdose deaths

Science Spotlight

February 09, 2017

An examination of national trend data shows that heroin and synthetic opioids are driving a recent increase in cocaine-related overdose deaths. The assessment was conducted by scientists at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (CDC), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The report showed that cocaine-related overdose deaths increased between 2000 and 2006, and declined between 2006 and 2010 (consistent with a reduction in supply and an increase in street prices). However, cocaine-related overdose deaths increased after 2010, despite decreased cocaine use. The scientists found that this latest increase was related to cocaine-related overdose deaths involving opioids, primarily heroin or synthetic opioids. This also corresponds to the growing supply and use of heroin and illicitly manufactured fentanyl in the United States. Data on drug overdose deaths were collected from the CDC's [National Vital Statistics System](#).



Photo ©iStock/sb-borg/



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Take #2: Massive increase in cultivation and use

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

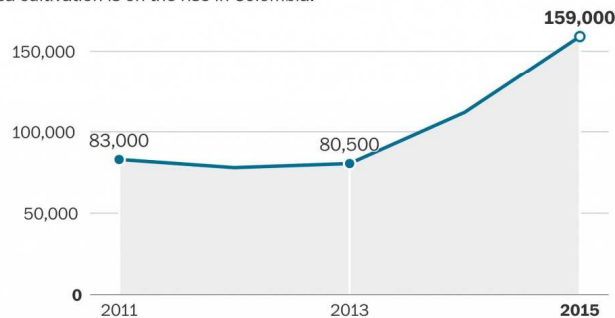
WorldViews • Analysis

American cocaine use is way up. Colombia's coca boom might be why.

By Nick Miroff March 4

Colombia's coca boom

Coca cultivation is on the rise in Colombia.

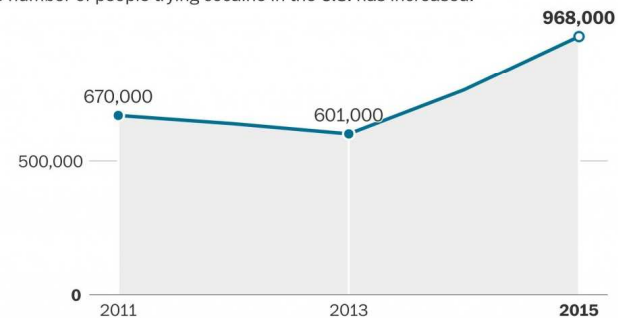


Figures are in hectares, an area equal to about 2.5 acres of land

Source: State Department

New cocaine users in U.S.

The number of people trying cocaine in the U.S. has increased.



Source: U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



Which is it? First, some ground rules

- Referring to “use” conflates two important but different concepts
 - *Prevalence*: the number of people who report having used any at all over the past year or month
 - *Consumption*: the number of metric tons consumed
- No single indicator perfectly captures drug prevalence and consumption
 - All are useful; all are imperfect



Which is it? First, some ground rules

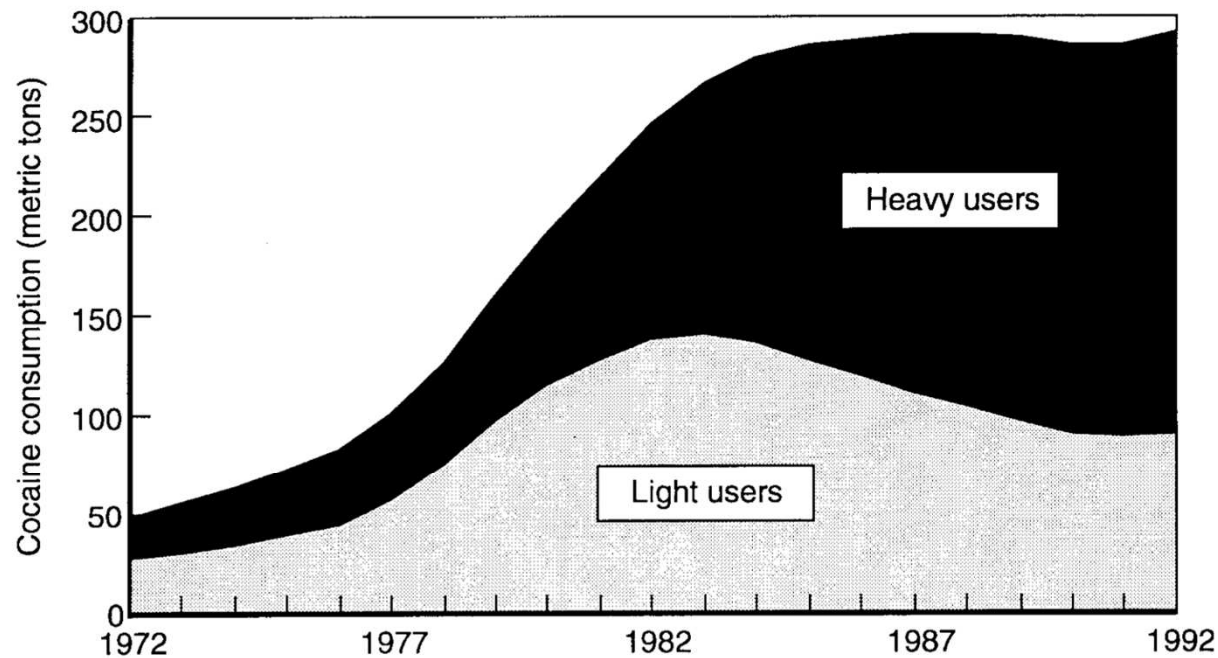
- Refer to different

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– *Co*

- No significant and c

– All



used any

influence

Figure S.1—Cocaine Consumption, by Type of User: 1972–1992

¹This analysis defines “heavy use” as once a week or more and “light use” as at least once a year, but less than weekly. At the end of 1992, there were an estimated 5.6 million light users and 1.7 million heavy users, by these definitions.

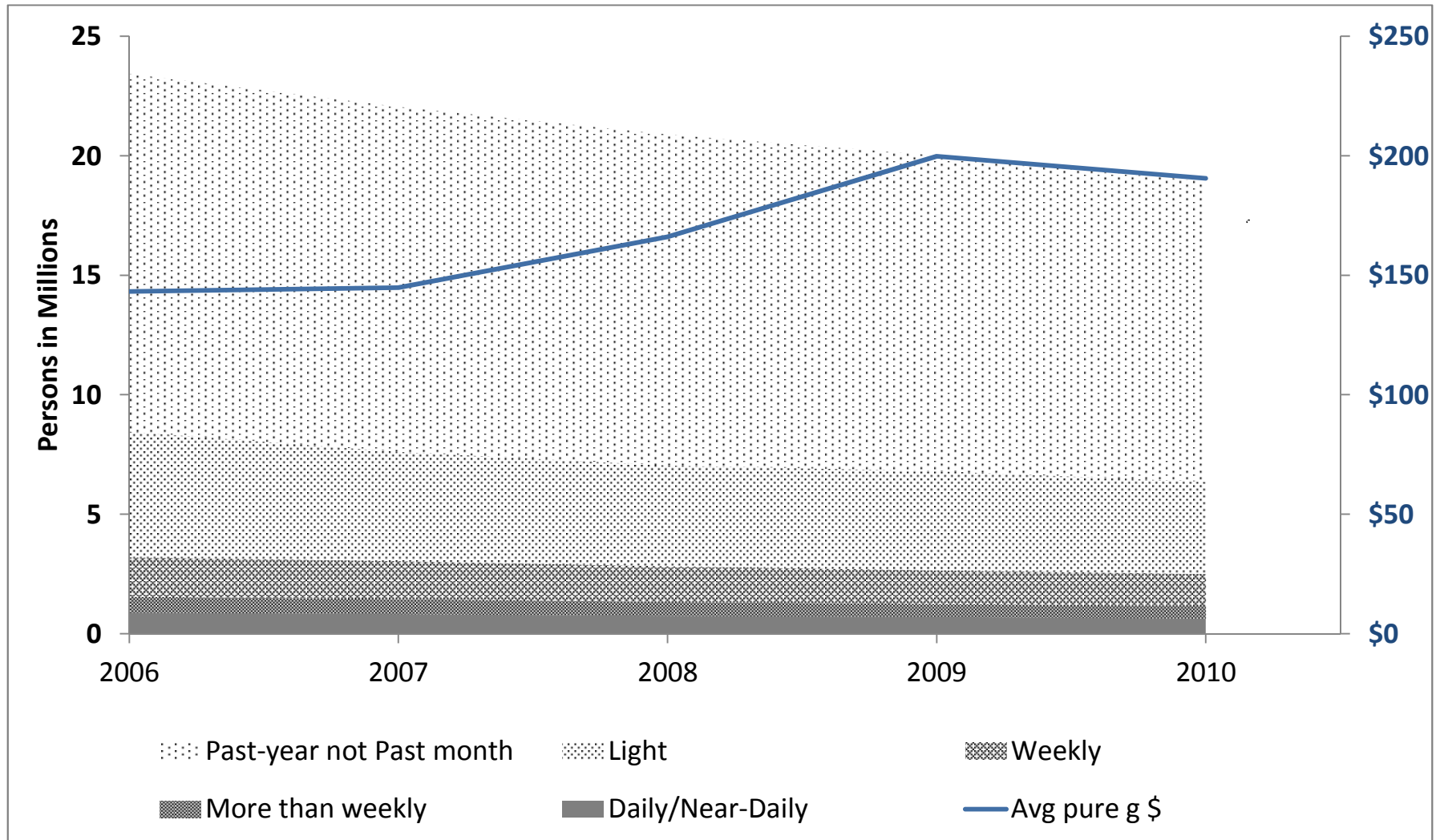
Source: Rydell & Everingham, 1994

A bit of history (2006-2010)

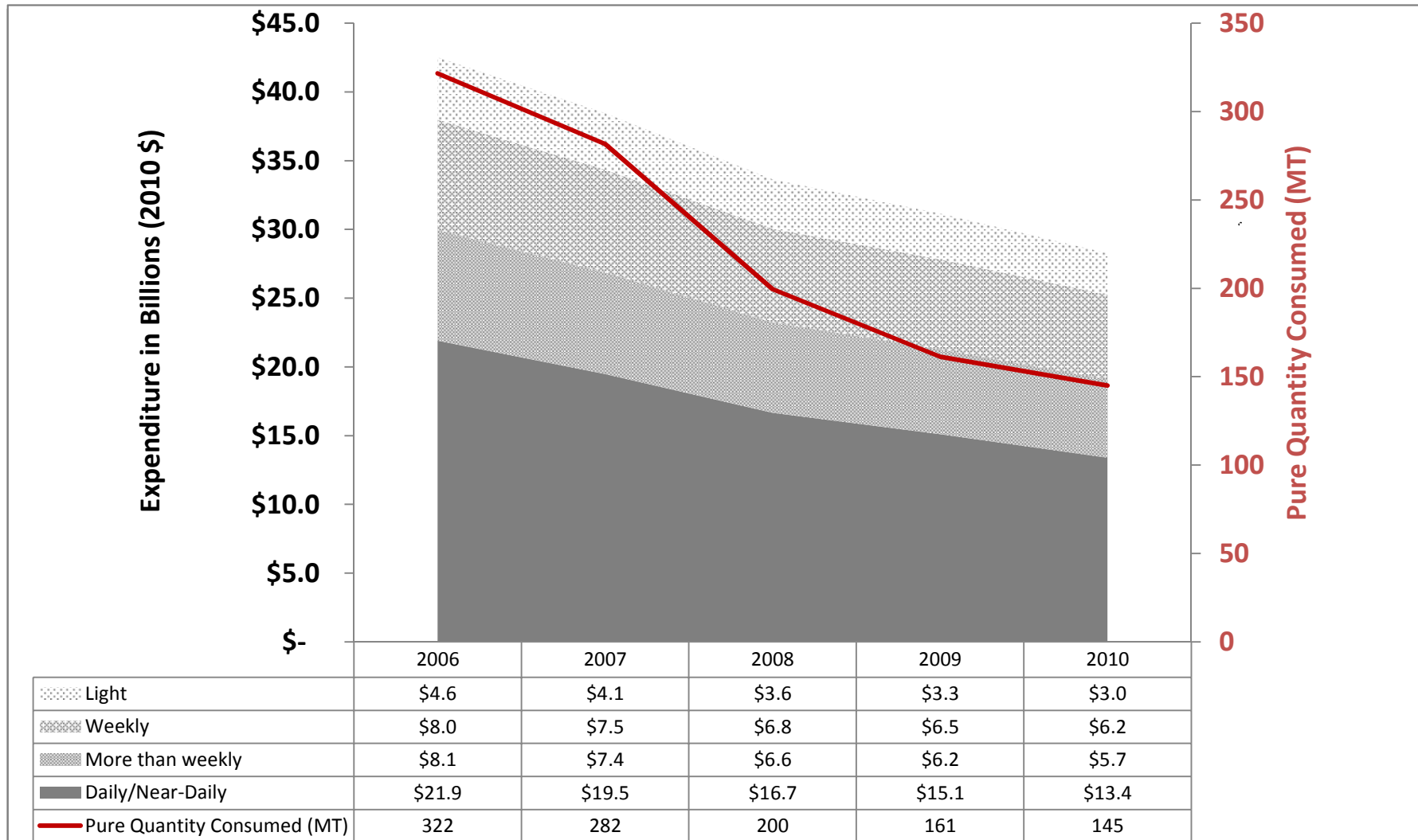
- U.S. cocaine consumption dropped 50% (ONDCP, 2014)
 - Echoed by supply-side indicators
- Many plausible explanations/contributing factors (Kilmer, 2016)
 - supply reduction policies
 - shifts in production and U.S. demand away from cocaine
 - broader economic trends
- Chronic polydrug use across cocaine, heroin, and meth was uncommon in the U.S.
 - Total chronic users \approx chronic cocaine users + chronic heroin users + chronic meth users (Caulkins, Everingham, Kilmer, & Midgette, 2013)



A bit of history (2006-2010)



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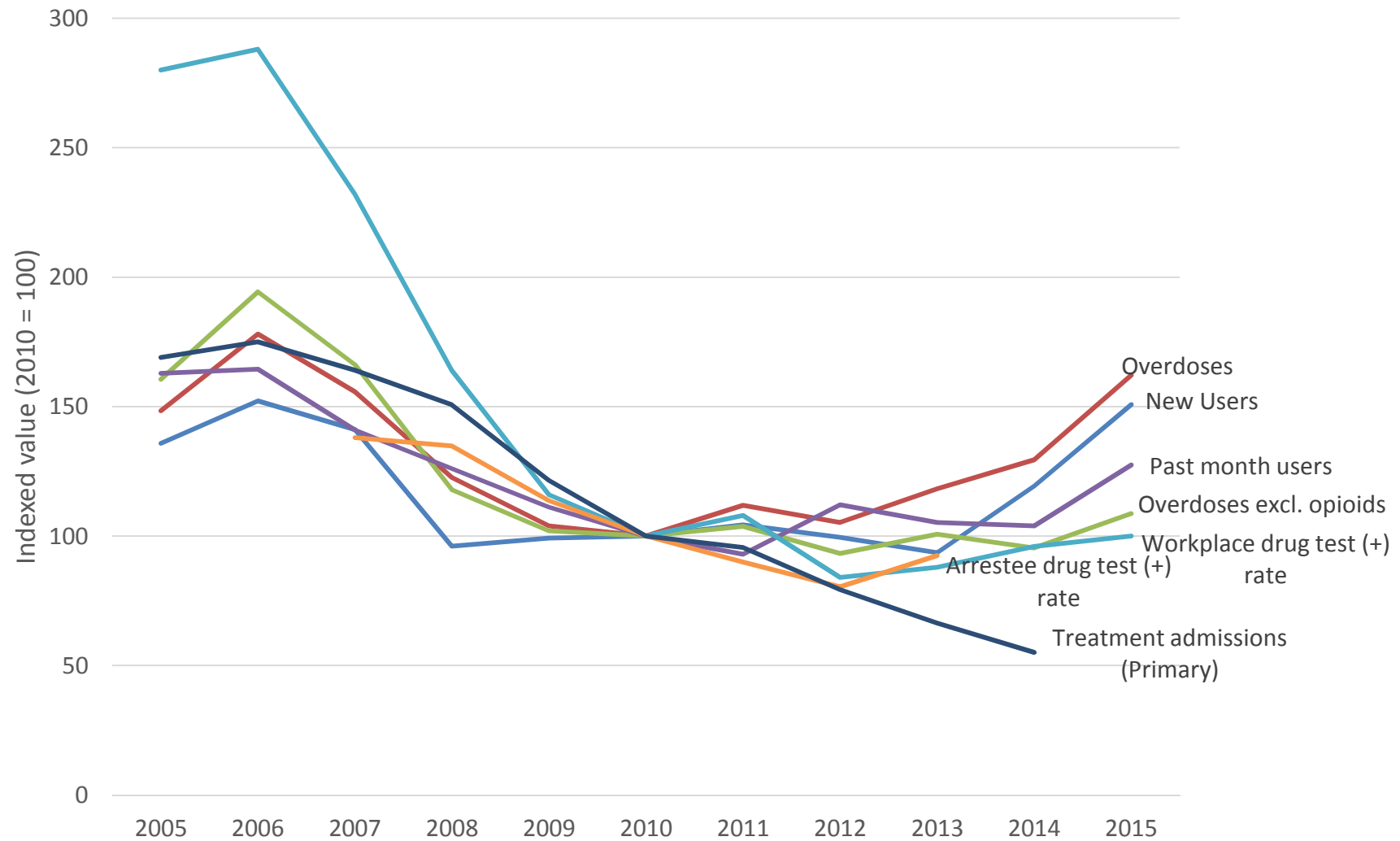


The story is cloudier post-2010

- Multi-year lag in availability of many key indicators
- Our best sources of data on cocaine (and heroin) use were eliminated
 - Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitor was cut in 2013
 - Drug Abuse Warning Network data discontinued in 2011



Trends in Cocaine Indicators



What do we know?

- The spike in cocaine use initiation is troubling (e.g., Wagner and Anthony, 2002)
- Something about the use of cocaine and opioids, or the purity of cocaine w.r.t. opioids has made use more dangerous (McCall Jones, Baldwin and Compton, 2017)



Uncertainty ≠ Inaction

- Now is the time to prepare systems to alert, prevent, and treat against increased heavy cocaine use

