Cash Most Common Currency Exchanged for Drugs, According to Final Report from National Pulse Check Project

“Cash, by far, is the most common currency exchanged for drugs,” according to the latest and final Pulse Check report (p. 23). Ethnographers, epidemiologists, treatment providers, and law enforcement officials from the 25 largest cities in the United States were asked to discuss the degree to which street-level drug transactions involve cash versus the exchange of specific goods and services. The national Pulse Check project, which has provided valuable and timely qualitative information on drug abuse since 1992, has been discontinued due to budgetary reasons. Following are highlights from the final Pulse Check report, published in January 2004.

- **Cash:** The majority of all drug transactions are for cash. Marijuana is more likely than other drugs to be traded for cash, while crack is less likely than other drugs to be traded for cash. The majority of heroin transactions in Washington, DC, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Denver, New York, and San Diego are cash only and sources in nearly half of the Pulse Check sites report that the 80 percent of powder cocaine transactions are cash only.

- **Shoplifted Merchandise:** Heroin is often traded for shoplifted merchandise (San Francisco, Atlanta, Boston, Phoenix, St. Louis, and Seattle). Likewise, a substantial portion of crack transactions involve shoplifted merchandise in Boston, Dallas, Houston, St. Louis, and Seattle.

- **Sex:** Respondents in 15 of the 25 Pulse Check sites estimate relatively high average percentages of crack transactions involving sex (10%-40%). Powder cocaine is also traded for sex in some cities; one source in Houston reports that as much as 80% of powder cocaine is traded for sex. Trading sex for heroin is most common in Cincinnati, Houston, Phoenix, and Portland, while methamphetamine is commonly traded for sex in Miami and Houston.

- **Gifts:** A source in Seattle believes that half of the marijuana that youths obtain is received as a gift to get them hooked. Methamphetamine is frequently given away by friends and acquaintances in clubs in San Francisco.

- **Other:** Heroin users sometimes need help injecting and offer heroin to other users in exchange for this service. Crack is sometimes exchanged for food stamps or drug buying or transport services. Property or merchandise, including guns or vehicles, have been reportedly exchanged for powder cocaine. Food stamps, other drugs, and property or merchandise may be exchanged for marijuana. Stolen precursor chemicals used to produce methamphetamine are sometimes traded for methamphetamine, or the drug may be manufactured by the user.