

Executive Summary

The ACT IDRS sample comprises a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Canberra, ACT. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm reduction services, as well as via peer referral. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2020 from June-August: subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were delivered via phone rather than face-to-face. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Canberra, ACT was relatively consistent with the ACT profile in previous years. There were fewer male participants in 2020 compared to 2019 (55% vs. 74%), but they were consistent in age (mean age 44 for 2020 and 2019 samples). The majority (85%) reported to be unemployed at the time of interview and most (96%) received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. Two-thirds of the participants (69%) reported that their drug of choice was heroin and the majority reported heroin as the drug injected most often in the past month (66%).

COVID-19 Impact

This brief section was included to summarise data collected specifically related to COVID-19 and associated restrictions; subsequent sections reflect standard annual reporting. Twenty-one per cent of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Since the beginning of March 2020, nearly all participants (94%) had practiced social distancing and 84% had undergone home isolation. Nearly two-fifths (37%) of participants reported injecting

drugs at a different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; of these participants, 70% reported reduced frequency of injection. Nevertheless, heroin was reported by 66% of participants as the drug most injected in February 2020 (before COVID-19 restrictions), and in the month prior to interview. Three-fifths of participants reported a perceived decrease in the use of methamphetamine since March (62%), with 50% of these participants citing 'decreased availability' as the primary reason. Smaller numbers reported an increase in alcohol (29%) and heroin (31%), mainly cited as due to 'greater anxiety/depression with COVID-19'. Most participants reported that crystal methamphetamine and heroin had increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 (92% and 54%, respectively). Furthermore, heroin and crystal methamphetamine were most commonly reported to have decreased in perceived purity (57% and 51%, respectively). Crystal methamphetamine was most commonly cited as the drug that had decreased in availability (64%). One-third (32%) of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, and 53% reported 'similar'. Of those on opioid agonist treatment since March 2020 (n=65), the majority reported that frequency of pharmacy doses and take-away doses had remained mostly stable (72% and 63%, respectively), as had urine testing/breathalysing (57%). Whilst the majority of participants reported 'no change' when commenting on their injecting practices since March 2020, 18% reported an increase in re-using their own needles. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of participants reportedly sought information on how to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or avoiding impacts of restrictions on drug acquisition and use. The majority (86%) of participants reported engaging in various harm reduction behaviours to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or impacts of COVID-19 restrictions while using or obtaining drugs.

Heroin

At least seven in ten participants have reported any recent use of heroin each year, with 85% reporting recent use in 2020 (77% in 2019). Frequency of use amongst consumers was recorded at the highest median days since monitoring began (165 days in the past six months in 2020). The median price for one gram of heroin was stable (\$300). There was a significant increase in the per cent perceiving heroin to be of 'low' purity (38% in 2019 vs. 61% in 2020).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of methamphetamine has been relatively common amongst the sample. In 2020, 64% of participants reported recent use, the lowest number observed in eight years, and significantly lower compared to 2019 (79%). Use is driven by the crystal form, with three-fifths (63%) reporting recent use of crystal and one-in-ten reporting use of powder (13%), the latter a decline relative to 2019 (27%). The median price for one point (0.10 grams) of crystal methamphetamine increased significantly from \$50 in 2019 to \$100 in 2020. Significantly more participants perceived crystal methamphetamine to be of 'low' purity and more 'difficult' to obtain in 2020 compared to 2019.

Cocaine

Historically, recent use of cocaine has typically been reported by one-in-five or fewer participants in the ACT sample, with 19% of participants reporting recent use in 2020 on a median of three days in the past six months.

Cannabis

At least three in four participants have reported recent use of cannabis each year (77% in 2020). Over half of consumers (53%) reported using cannabis daily. The price for a gram of bush and hydroponic remained stable at \$20. Over half (53%) perceived hydroponic cannabis as 'high' in potency whereas 45% reported this for bush cannabis. In 2020 significantly fewer participants reported that hydroponic cannabis was 'very easy' to obtain compared to 2019 (31% in 2020 versus 52% in 2019).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Non-prescribed use of most forms of pharmaceutical opioids has remained stable or declined. Fentanyl was the most commonly used non-prescribed opioid (9%), followed by oxycodone (8%), morphine (8%), methadone (7%) and codeine (7%).

Other Drugs

New psychoactive substance use was reported by less than one in ten participants (7%). In 2020, past six month use of non-prescribed alprazolam increased relative to 2019 (20% in 2020 versus 6% in 2019). In 2020, 8% reported past six month use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD. The per cent reporting tobacco use remained high and stable (92%). Recent use of alcohol was reported by 53% of participants, the lowest per cent since monitoring began. One-fifth (18%) of participants reported recent use of e-cigarettes, mostly containing nicotine.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

One in ten participants (13%) reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin (11%). Over half of those reporting overdosing (55%) reported receiving naloxone (Narcan[®]). Seven per cent of the total sample had been resuscitated with naloxone by a peer. Fifteen per cent reported distributive sharing and 6% reported receptive sharing of needles/syringes in the past month. Most participants reported to have last injected in their private homes (91%) and fewer participants reported any past month injection-related health problems in 2020 compared to 2019 (24%; 47% in 2019). There was a significant increase in those reporting to be in current drug treatment (71%), mainly methadone (52%), as compared to 2019 (49% and 30%, respectively). Two-fifths (40%) reported experiencing a mental health condition in the past six months, mainly depression. One-third (36%) reported past month criminal activity, with selling drugs for cash profit (26%) and property crime (18%) remaining the most common crimes.