

Stigma Snapshot

People who inject drugs 2021

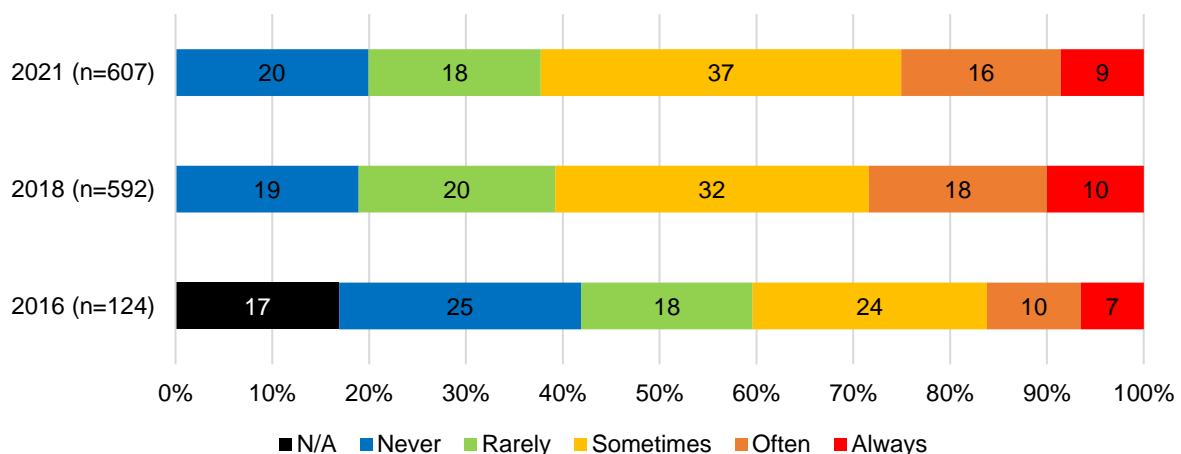
Stigma has a major impact on health outcomes for people living with blood borne viruses (BBVs) and sexually transmissible infections (STIs). The Australian Government Department of Health strategies for BBVs and STIs explicitly aim to “eliminate the negative impact of stigma, discrimination, and legal and human rights issues on people’s health”.

In 2021, a survey of people who inject drugs was conducted to investigate their experiences of stigma in relation to their injecting drug use. This followed on from previous surveys of people who inject drugs, conducted in 2016 in 2018.

614 people completed the 2021 survey

56% male – 67% heterosexual – 20% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
54% completed high school – 38% employed

In the last 12 months, have you experienced any stigma or discrimination in relation to your injecting drug use?



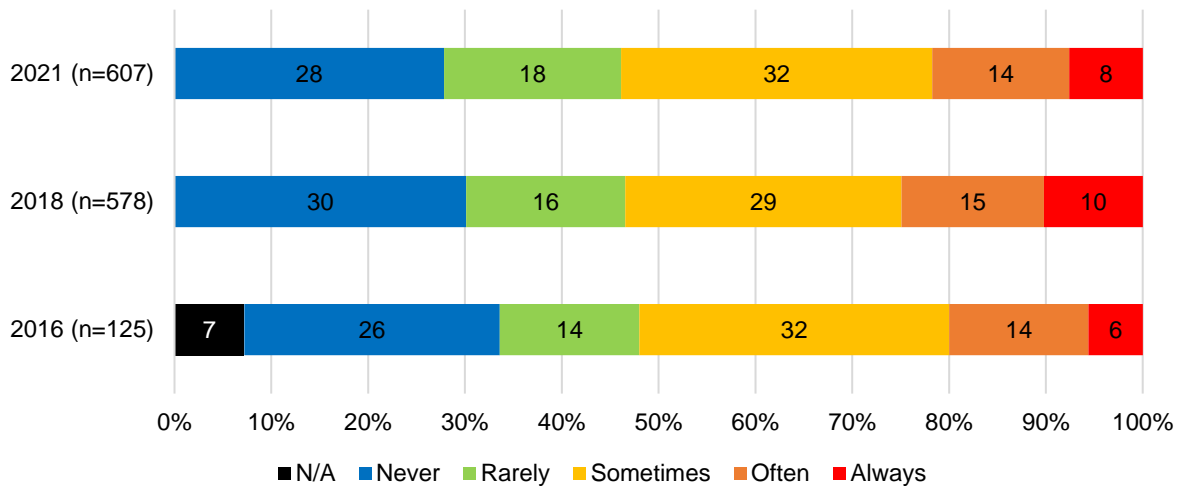
Note: N/A was not provided as a response option after 2016.

In 2021, four out of five participants (80%) reported experiencing stigma within the last 12 months in relation to their injecting drug use, including 25% reporting that they ‘often’ or ‘always’ experienced stigma. These proportions were not significantly different to those reported in 2018.



In 2021, nearly three-quarters of participants (72%) reported any negative treatment by health workers, including 22% who indicated that this was 'often' or 'always' the case. This was slightly higher than in 2018, when 70% of participants reported negative treatment from health workers, though the difference was not statistically significant.

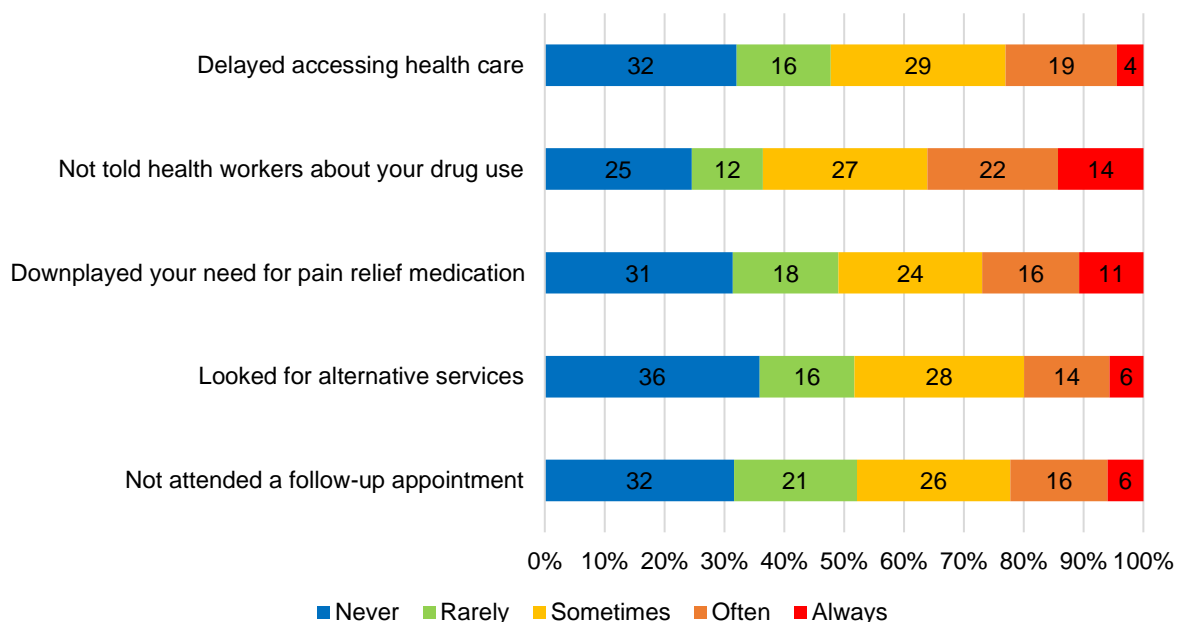
Health workers treated me negatively or differently to other people



Note: N/A was not provided as a response option after 2016.

Participants were asked additional questions about steps they had taken to avoid being treated negatively by health services.

In the last 12 months, how often have you done the following to avoid being treated negatively or differently by health services?



Most participants indicated that at some point in the past 12 months, they had not told health workers about their drug use (75%), downplayed their need for pain relief medication (69%), not attended a follow-up appointment (68%), delayed accessing health care (68%), or looked for alternative services (64%) in order to avoid negative treatment. Significantly, between 20%-36% of participants reported that they had 'often' or 'always' used these strategies to avoid negative treatment.

Stigma and discrimination continue to be commonly experienced by people who inject drugs, with no discernible change over the past five years. This remains the case within health care settings, where three-quarters of participants reported being treated negatively by health workers within the past 12 months. These findings are even more striking considering similar proportions of participants (64%-75%) reported different health care avoidance strategies to avoid this negative treatment. These findings highlight the significant barriers that stigma and discrimination can create to allowing people who inject drugs to access the quality of health care they need.

The Stigma Indicators Monitoring Project will continue to monitor experiences of stigma and discrimination reported by people who inject drugs, as well as negative behaviour expressed by health care professionals and the general public. Wide-ranging intervention initiatives are required to address stigma towards people who inject drugs within health care systems and throughout society more broadly.

If the results presented here have upset you in any way, we encourage you to seek support from Lifeline (13 11 44).

This project was supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health.

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of the Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) and their member organisations in assisting with recruiting survey participants. We would also like to thank everyone who completed the survey.

For more information on this project, please see http://bit.ly/stigma_indicators

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