

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is 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 the capital cities of Australia. 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 2021 from June-July. Interviews in 2020 and 2021 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed in various jurisdictions throughout the data collection periods. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample in 2021 (N=888) differed in some ways to the sample in 2020. Despite these differences, the 2021 sample predominantly identified as male (65%) with a mean age of 45, mostly consistent with the national profile in previous years. A significant change was observed in the drug of choice nominated by participants ($p<0.001$), with methamphetamine (45%) surpassing heroin (40%) for the first time since monitoring began. There was also a significant change in the drug injected most often in the past month ($p<0.001$), with methamphetamine being nominated as the drug injected most often by 53% of the sample, the highest per cent since monitoring began. Similarly, there was an increase in weekly or more frequent methamphetamine use compared to 2020 (58% versus 48%; $p<0.001$) whereas a decrease in weekly or greater use of heroin (37% versus 51%; $p<0.001$) was reported.

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. In 2021, 46% of the national sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 by the time of interview and no one had been diagnosed with the virus. The majority (72%) of participants were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and 18% of participants reported that they had quarantined for 14 or more days due to a possible exposure in the past 12 months. Ten per cent had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by the time of interview.

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of any heroin decreased from 63% in 2020 to 50% in 2021 ($p<0.001$), although there was large jurisdictional variation (e.g., $n\leq 5$ of participants in the NT sample versus 78% in the ACT sample). Median frequency of use also decreased, from 96 days in 2020 to 72 days in 2021 ($p=0.008$). Further, there were significant changes in perceived purity ($p<0.001$) and availability ($p=0.024$), with more participants perceiving heroin to be of 'high' purity (24%) and 'very easy' to obtain (40%) in 2021 compared to 2020 (14% and 35%, respectively). The price of a point of heroin also increased, from \$70 in 2020 to \$80 in 2021 ($p=0.026$).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has been gradually increasing since 2010. In 2021, 80% reported recent use, a significant increase from 2020 (72%; $p<0.001$) but similar to the per cent reporting use in 2019 (78%). Crystal was the most common form of methamphetamine used by participants (78%), followed by powder (12%) and base (3%). Relative to 2020, frequency of use increased from a median of 48 days to 72 days in 2021 ($p=0.008$), the highest frequency of use observed since monitoring began. The price of a point of crystal methamphetamine decreased from \$100 in 2020 to \$50 in 2021 ($p<0.001$),

returning to the median price observed between 2016-2019. There were significant changes in perceived purity ($p<0.001$) and availability ($p<0.001$). Specifically, more participants perceived purity to be 'high' (14% in 2020 versus 28% in 2021) and availability as 'very easy' (17% in 2020 versus 46% in 2021).

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine and frequency of use has generally decreased amongst the national sample since the beginning of monitoring (35% in 2001). In 2021, recent use of cocaine remained stable relative to 2020 (15% versus 17% in 2020). Median frequency of use remained stable at three days.

Cannabis

In 2020 and 2021, recent use of cannabis was reported by the lowest per cent since monitoring began (67%, respectively). Frequency of use remained stable at a median of 180 days (160 days in 2020). Just over half (51%) of people who had recently used cannabis reported using cannabis daily (48% in 2020). The price of a gram was stable for both bush and hydroponic cannabis, whereas a significant decrease was observed for the price on an ounce of bush in 2021 (\$200) relative to 2020 (\$250; $p=0.038$).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Non-prescribed use of most forms of pharmaceutical opioids has mainly remained stable or significantly declined since monitoring of each opioid first began. In 2021, morphine was the most common pharmaceutical opioid used in a non-prescribed context (16%). Six per cent of the national sample reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use, stable from 6% in 2020. There was a significant decrease of those reporting recent use of any methadone in 2021 relative to 2020 (35% versus 43% in 2020; $p=0.002$), although non-prescribed use remained stable at 13%.

Other Drugs

Use of NPS has remained low and stable over the period of monitoring. In 2021, 7% reported recent use, the lowest per cent since monitoring began. Use of 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis and opioids were reported by 4% and 1%, respectively. Recent use of e-cigarettes (18%) significantly increased compared to 2020 (13%; $p=0.002$), whilst use of all other monitored drugs remained stable. One-in-ten reported recent use of GHB /GBL/1,4-BD.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

Nearly one in five participants (17%) reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin (9%). Over one in three (37%) had ever been trained in naloxone administration and 4% of the sample had ever been resuscitated with naloxone by somebody trained through the take-home naloxone program. One-quarter of the sample reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months and 4% reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol. In 2021, 6% of participants reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe and 10% reported distributive sharing in the past month. One in four participants (26%) reported to have experienced injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly nerve damage (11%). Nearly two-fifths of the sample were currently in any drug treatment (37%), a decrease relative to 2020 (48%; $p<0.001$). Over two-fifths of participants in 2021 (44%) reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, 40% had received an RNA test and 9% reported having a current HCV infection. Fourteen per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia, with 8% undertaking this in the past year. Self-reported mental health problems in the past six months and past month criminal activity remained stable in 2021 (47% and 39%, respectively).