

Executive Summary

The New South Wales (NSW) 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 Sydney, New South Wales. 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 NSW IDRS sample in 2020 were predominantly male (61%) with a mean age of 44 (SD:9) years, significantly younger than participants in 2019 (46 (SD:9) years). The majority (92%) of the sample was unemployed at the time of interview (91% in 2019), and participants reported a median weekly income of \$450 (IQR=378-550) in 2020, significantly higher than \$350 (IQR=260-450) reported in 2019. Over half of the NSW sample (57%) reported that heroin was their drug of choice, with 55% of participants reporting heroin was also the drug they injected most often in the past month, similar to findings in previous years.

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. Over two-fifths (41%) of the NSW sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 by the time of interview, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Since the beginning of March 2020, the majority of participants (94%) had practiced social distancing and 83% had undergone home isolation. Almost one-third (32%) of participants reported injecting drugs at a

different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; of these participants, 62% reported reduced frequency of injection. Nevertheless, heroin was reported by 54% of participants as the drug most injected in February 2020 (before COVID-19 restrictions), and by 55% in the month prior to interview. Following this, methamphetamine was reported by 37% as the drug most injected in February, and 34% in the month prior to interview. Participants reported a perceived decrease in the use of methamphetamine (57%), with 38% of these participants citing 'decreased availability' as the primary reason. An increase in alcohol use was reported by nearly one-third of consumers (30%), mainly cited as due to 'greater anxiety/depression with COVID-19' (45%), followed by 'boredom' (28%). Most participants who commented reported that crystal methamphetamine and heroin had increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 (85% and 61%, respectively). Furthermore, crystal methamphetamine and heroin were most commonly reported to have decreased in perceived purity (65% and 48%, respectively), and were also the drugs most commonly cited as having decreased in availability (70% and 61%, respectively) since March. Over one-third (35%) of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, 45% reported 'similar' and 20% reported their mental health was 'better'. Of those on opioid agonist treatment since March 2020 (n=80), 28% reported an increase in take-away doses since March, whilst 15% reported a decrease in their dose of medication. Whilst the majority of participants reported 'no change' when commenting on changes related to their injecting practices since March 2020, 14% reported an increase in re-using their own needles. Almost two-fifths (37%) 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

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has remained relatively common amongst the NSW sample since monitoring began (78% in 2020). Forty-four per cent of recent consumers reported daily use of heroin in 2020. Whilst last price paid remained similar to 2019, the percentage reporting heroin purity as 'high' declined, relative to 2019 (9% versus 27%). Just one-fifth (22%) of recent consumers reported that heroin was 'very easy' to obtain, a significant decrease from 2019 (44%).

Methamphetamine

The use of methamphetamine has gradually been increasing in the NSW sample since reporting commenced, with three in four participants (77%) reporting past six month use in 2020 (75% in 2019). Consistent with the past few years, use was driven by the crystal form (75%), with one in ten participants (11%) reporting use of the powder form. Weekly or more frequent use was reported by 71% of participants who had recently consumed any methamphetamine (68% in 2019). The median price of a point of crystal significantly decreased in 2020 (\$60; \$50 in 2019), as did the median price of one gram (\$500; \$250 in 2019).

Cocaine

Recent use (past 6 months) of cocaine has generally decreased since the beginning of monitoring, with 23% of the NSW sample reporting recent use in 2020. Very few participants reported using cocaine on a weekly or more frequent basis.

Cannabis

Approximately two in three participants have reported recent use (past 6 months) of cannabis annually, with 64% of NSW participants reporting use in 2020 (73% in 2019). Almost two-fifths (39%) of recent consumers reported using cannabis on a daily basis in 2020. Most of the NSW sample (93%) reported recent use of hydroponic cannabis, though one-fifth (22%) of recent consumers perceived hydroponic cannabis as being 'very

easy' to obtain, significantly less so than in 2019 (48%).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Whilst recent non-prescribed buprenorphine-naloxone, oxycodone and codeine use significantly decreased in 2020, non-prescribed use of all other forms of pharmaceutical opioids remained low and stable in 2020. Less than one in ten participants (8%) reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use.

Other Drugs

Recent use of new psychoactive substances was reported by 7% of NSW participants, with 6% reporting recent use of drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis. Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use declined significantly from 2019 (41%) to 2020 (27%). One in ten (11%) reported recent non-prescribed pregabalin use. Most participants (95%) reported recent tobacco use, and the majority of this group (90%) reported daily use. Nine per cent of participants reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

One-fifth (21%) reported a non-fatal overdose on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin. Of those who reported a past year non-fatal opioid overdose and could respond, 40% reported that they had been resuscitated by a peer using Narcan/naloxone. Six per cent reported receptive sharing of needles/syringes, and equal numbers (6%) reported distributive sharing of needles/syringes in the month preceding interview. Almost one-third (31%) of the sample reported having an injection-related health issue in the past month, a significant decrease from 2019 (46%). Almost three in five participants (56%) were currently in drug treatment. Almost half (47%) of the sample self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the past six months, and 61% of these participants had seen a health professional. Self-reported past month criminal activity remained relatively stable in 2020.