

## Executive Summary

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) has been running in Victoria since 1997. One component of the IDRS includes a survey of people who inject drugs. In 2020, the Victorian (VIC) IDRS sample comprised a sentinel sample of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Melbourne, Victoria. 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 to August, subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were administered via phone rather than face to face. This consideration should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample relative to previous years.**

### Sample Characteristics

As in previous years, the VIC sample in 2020 mostly consisted of men (59%); the mean age of participants was 44 years. Fifty-eight per cent reported holding a post-school qualification, a significant increase from 2019 (37%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Over two thirds of participants (72%) reported that heroin was their drug of choice, as well as the drug injected most frequently in the previous month (70%). Less than one fifth (17%) of the sample reported methamphetamine as their drug of choice, and a quarter (25%) as the drug injected most often in the past month.

### COVID-19 Impact

*This brief section was included to summarise data specifically related to COVID-19 and associated restrictions; subsequent sections reflect standard annual reporting.* Twenty 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, the majority of

participants (87%) had practised social distancing and over two thirds (68%) had undergone home isolation. More than one quarter of the sample (26%) reported a change in the frequency of injecting drugs in the past month as compared with February 2020, of whom almost half (46%) reported greater frequency of injection. Most participants reported no change in their use of benzodiazepines (91%), pregabalin (90%), cocaine (87%), tobacco (83%), cannabis (77%), alcohol (76%), e-cigarettes (72%), methamphetamine (67%), and heroin (57%) since March 2020. Crystal methamphetamine and heroin were the drugs most participants reported had increased in price (89% and 65%, respectively) since March 2020. Heroin and crystal methamphetamine were also most commonly reported to have decreased in purity (by 43% and 42% of participants, respectively). Cannabis and methamphetamine were reported to have decreased in availability (40% and 36%, respectively). Of those participants who were in any drug treatment in the past six months ( $n=116$ ), over half (62%) reported disruption to their drug treatment, such as 'appointments via phone/video rather than face-to-face' (48%). Of those participants on opioid agonist treatment since March 2020 ( $n=95$ ), 43% reported receiving an increase in take-away doses, whilst 26% reported a decrease in pharmacy doses. Most participants reported no change to their injecting practices since March 2020. Almost a fifth (19%) of the sample reported having sought information on how to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 or avoiding the impacts of restrictions on drug acquisition and use. Most participants (83%) reported engaging in harm reduction behaviours to minimise the risk of acquiring COVID-19 while using or obtaining drugs, such as 'washing hands with soap/sanitiser before handling drugs/money' (70%). One-third of participants (33%) reported their mental health over the past four weeks to be 'worse' than in February 2020.

## Heroin

Recent use (past six months) of heroin has remained fairly stable in recent years, with 85% of participants reporting recent use in 2020. Most participants (88%) reported weekly use of heroin in 2020. Significantly fewer participants (51%) perceived heroin to be 'very easy' to obtain in 2020 (68% in 2019;  $p=0.011$ ).

## Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years, although use has trended upwards since monitoring began in 2000. In 2020, two thirds of the sample (66%) reported recent use of any methamphetamine, with crystal methamphetamine remaining the most common form (64%; 68% in 2019;  $p=0.608$ ).

## Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine was similar to previous years, with 17% of the sample reporting recent use (10% in 2019;  $p=0.089$ ). Injecting remained the most common route of administration (55%), followed by snorting (39%).

## Cannabis

Recent use of cannabis remained stable in 2020, with 69% of the sample reporting recent use. Just under half (47%) of participants reported daily use, unchanged from 2019. Smoking continued to be the most common route of administration in 2020, reported by 99% of the sample. Hydroponic cannabis remained the most commonly used form of cannabis (90%), followed by bush cannabis (31%).

## Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent use of any methadone has remained stable in the past few years, reported by 52% of the sample in 2020. Any use of buprenorphine-naloxone decreased significantly in 2020 compared to 2019, with 15% of participants reporting recent use (24% in 2019;  $p=0.042$ ). The most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioids used in 2020 were methadone (10%), morphine (8%), and oxycodone (7%).

## Other Drugs

Recent use of new psychoactive substances remained low in 2020 at 6% of the sample (9% in 2019;  $p=0.361$ ). A third of participants (33%) reported recent non-prescribed use of any benzodiazepine (40% in 2019;  $p=0.212$ ). Alcohol use remained stable in 2020 relative to 2019, with 51% of participants reporting recent use (58% in 2019;  $p=0.271$ ). While recent tobacco use remained highly prevalent in the sample, at 87%, this figure was a significant reduction from 2019 (94%;  $p=0.045$ ), and the lowest per cent since monitoring began. Recent use of e-cigarettes also decreased in 2020, down to 10% of the sample (24% in 2019;  $p=0.001$ ). A third of these participants (33%) reported using e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool.

## Drug-Related Harms and Associated Behaviours

One fifth of the sample (20%) reported a non-fatal overdose on any opioid in the past year, most commonly heroin (19%). Twenty-seven per cent of participants reported that they had resuscitated someone in the past year using naloxone. A. In 2020, more participants reported last injecting in a private home relative to 2019 (71% versus 55%;  $p=0.003$ ), and fewer reported last injecting on a 'street, park or bench' relative to 2019 (10% versus 23%;  $p=0.002$ ). Fifty-eight per cent of the sample were in drug treatment at the time of interview. Over half (57%) of participants self-reported a mental health problem in 2020, a significant increase from 2019 (42%;  $p=0.014$ ). The most common mental health problems reported were depression (75%) and anxiety (60%). Self-reported criminal activity remained fairly stable in 2020, although significantly fewer reported an arrest in the past year (25% versus 43% in 2019;  $p=0.001$ ), or a lifetime prison history (59% versus 71% in 2019;  $p=0.035$ ).