



## Recent Illicit Drugs Reporting System (IDRS) results for the Northern Territory

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### KEY FINDINGS

- Participation in the IDRS by people aged 35 years and older has increased while younger age groups have declined
- Morphine is the primary injected opioid in the NT
- Oxycodone has replaced Physeptone as the next most injected opioid
- Recent use of crystal methamphetamine has reached the same level as recent use of speed powder
- Reported needle sharing and reuse appears to have declined

### INTRODUCTION

This bulletin presents recent illicit drug use and selected harm data for the Northern Territory based on yearly IDRS surveys.

#### Sample characteristics

IDRS participants over the previous 5 years have been aged around 40 years old (Table 1), mainly male and usually unemployed or receiving a pension or benefit. Between 20 percent and 28 percent of the sample have been Indigenous.

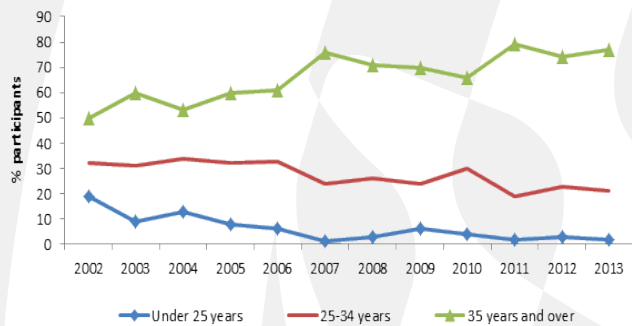
**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participant sample, 2009-2013**

|                                              | 2009<br>N=99  | 2010<br>N=99  | 2011<br>N=98  | 2012<br>N=125 | 2013<br>N=91  |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Age – mean years (range)                     | 40<br>(21-61) | 41<br>(22-63) | 42<br>(18-63) | 42<br>(23-62) | 40<br>(21-60) |
| Sex (% male)                                 | 69            | 72            | 70            | 71            | 65            |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (%) | 20            | 21            | 28            | 28            | 21            |
| Employment (%):                              |               |               |               |               |               |
| Not employed/on a pension                    | 88            | 78            | 87            | 94            | 79            |
| Full time                                    | 6             | 12            | 8             | 3             | 7             |
| Part time/casual                             | 4             | 8             | 4             | 3             | 11            |
| Home duties                                  | 0             | 0             | 0             | 0             | 1             |
| Student                                      | 0             | 0             | 0             | 0             | 1             |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Figure 1 shows that while the mean age of participants has been fairly stable, over a longer period participation by people aged 35 years and older has increased while younger age groups have declined.

**Figure 1: Age distribution of participants in the NT IDRS samples, 2002-2013**

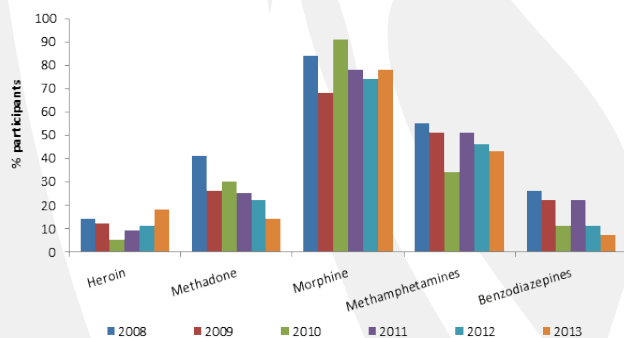


Source: IDRS participant interviews

## Drug use patterns

Figure 2 demonstrates a key characteristic of illicit drug use in the NT, the predominate use and injection of pharmaceutical opioids, such as morphine and methadone, over heroin. Methamphetamines, speed powder in particular, are the next most commonly injected illicit drug.

**Figure 2: Drug use patterns among participants in the NT IDRS samples, 2008-2013**



Source: IDRS participant interviews

Daily injection has been the most commonly reported injecting frequency among the IDRS samples (Table 2), with around 60% injecting one or more times a day.

**Table 2: Frequency of injection, 2008-2013**

| Frequency of injecting in last month (%) | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=125 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| Not injected in last month               | 0             | 1            | 1            | 0            | 3             | 2            |
| Weekly or less                           | 15            | 22           | 17           | 20           | 14            | 23           |
| More than weekly, but less than daily    | 17            | 14           | 18           | 15           | 15            | 16           |
| Once per day                             | 35            | 34           | 28           | 26           | 40            | 28           |
| 2-3 times a day                          | 32            | 26           | 35           | 37           | 29            | 30           |
| >3 times a day                           | 2             | 2            | 0            | 2            | 1             | 1            |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Pharmaceutical morphine, has been consistently the most reported recent use and recent injection drug, with around 80% (table 3) of the IDRS sample reporting recent use in each of the last 6 years. Morphine has been rated as easy or very easy to obtain by at least 50% of the sample, with the price of 100mg of MS Contin, the most frequently purchased form, being stable at \$80 a capsule. There is no obvious relationship between price and reported availability.

**Table 3: Recent use of morphine, 2008-2013**

|                                       | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=124 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Used                                | 89            | 70           | 91           | 81           | 77            | 80           |
| % Availability:                       |               |              |              |              |               |              |
| Very easy                             | 7             | 14           | 12           | 25           | 22            | 34           |
| Easy                                  | 43            | 55           | 56           | 54           | 52            | 20           |
| Median price of 100 mg MS Contin (\$) | 80            | 80           | 80           | 80           | 80            | 80           |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Recent injection of oxycodone has been consistent at around one-fifth of the sample (Table 4), while recent injection of Physeptone may be declining. Recent injection of Subutex® and Suboxone® was at relatively low levels between 2010 and 2012, increasing into 2013.

**Table 4: Recent injection of other pharmaceutical opioids, 2010-2013**

|                         | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|-------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| % Oxycodone             | 20   | 23   | 18   | 23   |
| % Physeptone            | 24   | 18   | 16   | 6    |
| % Methadone syrup       | 9    | 7    | 8    | 9    |
| % Subutex/buprenorphine | 6    | 5    | 7    | 13   |
| % Suboxone              | 7    | 3    | 6    | 10   |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

In contrast, recent heroin use has been reported by a minority of the sample, between 5% and 17% (Table 5), although the 2013 result is the highest seen in the last 6 years and is the third year of increase in a row. Reports of price and availability are shown in Table 5 but must be treated with causation due to the low numbers of respondents able to comment.

**Table 5: Recent use of heroin, 2008-2013**

|                            | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=124 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|----------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Used                     | 14            | 13           | 5            | 9            | 11            | 17           |
| % Availability:            |               |              |              |              |               |              |
| Very easy                  | 17            | 0            | 0            | 0            | 8             | 0            |
| Easy                       | 0             | 67           | 33           | 50           | 33            | 29           |
| Median price of 1 cap (\$) | 100           | 80           | -            | 80           | 110           | 100          |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Speed powder (Table 6) is the most commonly reported form of methamphetamine used within six months of interview. The proportion of the yearly samples rating speed powder has very easy to obtain have increased steadily since 2008, with a marked increase into 2013. The most commonly purchased quantity of speed powder is a point, the median price of which increased from \$60 in 2008 to a maximum of \$150 in 2012.

**Table 6: Recent use of speed powder, 2008-2013**

|                              | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=124 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Used                       | 50            | 50           | 25           | 43           | 46            | 31           |
| % Availability:              |               |              |              |              |               |              |
| Very easy                    | 14            | 16           | 18           | 24           | 27            | 48           |
| Easy                         | 53            | 65           | 24           | 56           | 62            | 33           |
| Median price of 1 point (\$) | 60            | 50           | 100          | 100          | 150           | 100          |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Recent use of crystal methamphetamine (Table 7) has fluctuated but generally increased since 2009, as have the proportions reporting that it is very easy to obtain.

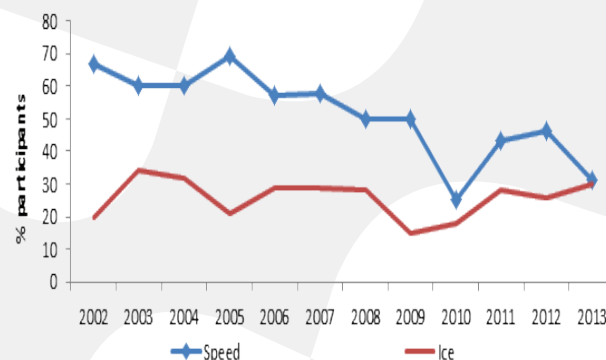
**Table 7: Recent use of crystal methamphetamine, 2008-2013**

|                              | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=124 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Used                       | 28            | 15           | 18           | 28           | 26            | 30           |
| % Availability:              |               |              |              |              |               |              |
| Very easy                    | 33            | 8            | 9            | 23           | 13            | 42           |
| Easy                         | 50            | 62           | 55           | 54           | 54            | 48           |
| Median price of 1 point (\$) | 125           | 100          | 200          | 150          | 150           | 140          |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Over the longer term, 2002 to 2013, speed powder use shows a slight but significant downward trends amid fluctuations (Figure 3). For the same period, recent use of ice shows no significant linear movement, although

it has increased steadily since 2009, as mentioned above. It is apparent that recent use of speed powder and crystal methamphetamine are currently at the same levels.

**Figure 3: Proportion of participants reporting methamphetamine use in the past six months, 2002-2013.**


Source: IDRS participant interviews

Cannabis use (Table 8) has been consistently high, moving between 60% and 80% of the IDRS samples since 2008. Reports of availability and price have also remained stable.

**Table 8: Recent use of cannabis, 2008-2013**

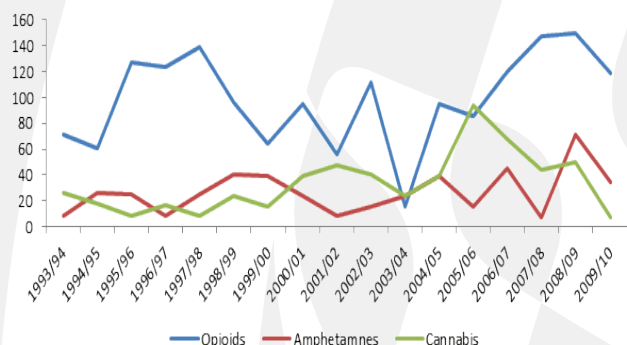
|                     | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=124 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Used              | 78            | 78           | 72           | 71           | 71            | 80           |
| % Availability:     |               |              |              |              |               |              |
| Very easy           | 25            | 30           | 25           | 44           | 30            | 51           |
| Easy                | 52            | 54           | 58           | 51           | 68            | 37           |
| Median price of 1gm | 30            | 30           | 30           | 30           | 30            | 30           |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

## Selected harms and risks

The rate of drug-related admissions to NT hospital per million persons over time for the drug types included above, opioids, amphetamines and cannabis, are shown in Figure 4. The rate of admissions for cannabis over the entire period shown has a small but significant upward trend, although in recent years it has declined. Opioid-related admissions show periods of increase and decline with no overall pattern, while amphetamine-related admissions fluctuate at a low level. Although not shown here, in each case the admission rates are lower than those at the national level.

**Figure 4: Drug related hospital admissions, per million persons, 2008-2013**



Source: IDRS participant interviews

In most years, difficulty injecting and scarring or bruising have been the most common injection-related problems reported by the IDRS samples (Table 9). Reports of abscess and infection appear to have declined steadily since 2008.

**Table 9: Proportion of participants reporting injection-related problems within one month prior to interview, by problem type, 2003-2013**

|                        | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=125 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Overdose             | 1             | 11           | 5            | 3            | 19            | 3            |
| % Dirty hit            | 18            | 25           | 22           | 12           | 46            | 13           |
| % Abscess/infection    | 11            | 16           | 11           | 10           | 9             | 4            |
| % Scarring/bruising    | 53            | 45           | 30           | 45           | 42            | 32           |
| % Difficulty injecting | 45            | 42           | 27           | 37           | 34            | 25           |
| % Thrombosis           | 11            | 6            | 4            | 7            | 1             | 4            |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Small proportions of survey participants report lending or borrowing of needles, with those proportions declining since 2008 (Table 10). Larger proportions report reusing their own needles, although this has also declined substantially since 2008.

**Table 10: Needle sharing and use, 2008-2013**

|                     | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=125 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Lent a needle     | 9             | 3            | 4            | 8            | 3             | 3            |
| % Borrowed a needle | 8             | 5            | 3            | 4            | 2             | 2            |
| % Reused own needle | 58            | 37           | 46           | 28           | 26            | 22           |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

In most years, around one-quarter (Table 11) of those who had driven a car in the previous six months reported driving under the influence of alcohol, fluctuating between 15% and 33%, but showing no clear change over time. Substantially larger proportions reported driving after taking an illicit drug, fluctuating around 75% of recent drivers, and showing no signs of systematic change.

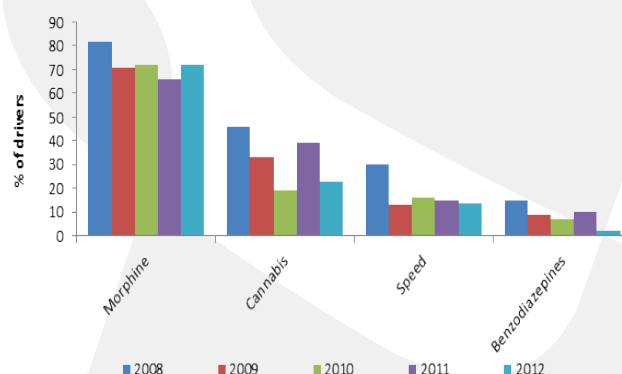
**Table 11: Driving risk behaviours, 2008-2013**

|                                         | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|-----------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| % Driven under the influence of alcohol | 21   | 26   | 33   | 15   | 25   | 31   |
| % Driven after taking illicit drug      | 76   | 78   | 83   | 76   | 72   | 69   |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

In each year since 2008 around 70% (Figure 5) of those who had driven after taking an illicit drug reported that drug as morphine, around 35% reported cannabis and smaller proportions speed powder and a benzodiazepine. In each year since 2008 a large majority of those who had driven after taking an illicit drug reported that it has no impact upon their driving.

**Figure 5: Participants driving after taking an illicit drug by drug type, 2008-2013**



Source: IDRS participant interviews

Self-reported criminal activities have declined between 2008 and 2013 (Table 12), with 14% reporting any crime in 2013. Self-reported property crime has declined eight-fold and drug dealing has halved while remaining the most frequently reported crime.

**Table 12: Self-reported criminal activity**

|                           | 2008<br>N=103 | 2009<br>N=99 | 2010<br>N=99 | 2011<br>N=98 | 2012<br>N=125 | 2013<br>N=91 |
|---------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| % Drug dealing            | 19            | 14           | 19           | 20           | 11            | 10           |
| % Property                | 16            | 16           | 16           | 14           | 4             | 2            |
| % Fraud                   | 5             | 3            | 2            | 2            | 1             | 3            |
| % Violence                | 4             | 3            | 2            | 3            | 1             | 0            |
| <b>% Any crime</b>        | <b>35</b>     | <b>26</b>    | <b>32</b>    | <b>31</b>    | <b>16</b>     | <b>14</b>    |
| % Arrested last 12 months | 25            | 20           | 24           | 26           | 17            | 14           |

Source: IDRS participant interviews

## Conclusion

The Northern Territory Illicit Drug market is characterised by the relatively high levels of use of morphine and other pharmaceutical opioids and the relative low levels of use and poor availability of heroin and cocaine. This pattern has been consistent for a number of years.

Oxycodone has been reported as the commonly injected other opioid since 2011, displacing Physeptone. In 2013 recent injection of Subutex ® and Suboxone ® also exceeded that of Physeptone.

The recent use of speed powder has declined over time while the recent use of crystal methamphetamine has increased steadily since 2009. In 2013 recent use of crystal methamphetamine increased to the same level as recent use of speed powder.

The illicit drug related harm indicators shown here fluctuate over time, although some aspects of needle sharing show declines.

## Suggested citation

Moon, C. (2013). Recent Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) results for the Northern Territory. Drug Trends Bulletin, December 2013. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales.