

Executive Summary

The EDRS sample is a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisement on websites and via word-of-mouth in the capital cities of Australia. 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 April-August. 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 period. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

In 2021, the national EDRS sample (n=774) differed in some ways to the sample in 2020. Despite these differences, the 2021 sample continued to comprise predominantly young (median 24; IQR=21-29) males (63%), most of whom held tertiary qualifications (60% completed post-school qualifications) and lived in a rental house/flat (60%) or resided with their parents/at their family home (26%) at the time of interview. Ecstasy and cannabis continued to be the drugs of choice, and cannabis and alcohol were the drugs used most often.

COVID-19

Over half (55%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, although few participants had received a positive diagnosis (n≤5). Over one-tenth (11%) reported that they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of interview.

Ecstasy

Whilst ecstasy capsules remained the most commonly used form of ecstasy, recent use declined significantly in 2021 (70%; $p<0.001$), as did ecstasy pills (42%; $p<0.001$) and ecstasy powder (26%; $p<0.001$). Recent use of crystal remained stable (53%). Frequency of use also significantly declined, with median days of 'any' ecstasy use dropping from 12 days in 2020 to 7 days in 2021 ($p<0.001$), and weekly or more

ecstasy use more than halving amongst recent consumers, from 27% in 2020 to 13% in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Over three-quarters (76%) reported that their last ecstasy capsule contained crystal, whilst 27% reported that it contained powder. The median price for all four forms of ecstasy increased significantly in 2021. Significant changes were observed in the perceived purity ($p=0.001$) and availability ($p<0.001$) of ecstasy capsules, with participants less likely to report purity as 'high' and availability as 'very easy' in 2021.

Methamphetamine

Methamphetamine use has been declining over time but remained stable between 2020 and 2021, with 26% reporting any recent use in the latter year. Over one-quarter (28%) of those who had recently used methamphetamine reported weekly or more frequent use, a significant increase from 17% in 2020 ($p=0.022$). Whilst powder has historically been the most commonly used form of methamphetamine, recent use of powder (12%) dropped to below crystal (16%) for the first time in 2021. The vast majority of participants (93%) who had used crystal had recently smoked this form. Price, perceived purity and perceived availability of both powder and crystal methamphetamine remained stable between 2020 and 2021.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine increased significantly from 68% in 2020 to 80% in 2021 ($p<0.001$), the largest per cent observed since monitoring commenced. This increase was mostly driven by significant increases in TAS, VIC and NSW, although slight increases were observed across all jurisdictions. Frequency of use, however, remained stable in 2021, as did the per cent of recent consumers reporting weekly or more frequent use (7%). The price of a gram of cocaine significantly increased ($p<0.001$), and a significant change was observed in the perceived purity ($p=0.006$), whereby participants were less like to report 'high' purity. In contrast, a significant change was observed in the perceived availability of cocaine ($p=0.002$), with participants more likely to report it as being 'very easy' to obtain in 2021.

Cannabis

Approximately four in five participants have reported any recent use of cannabis each year since monitoring began in 2003. In 2021, the per cent reporting recent use (84%) significantly decreased relative to 2020 (88%; $p=0.024$). Weekly or more frequent use of cannabis among recent consumers remained stable (64%; 62% in 2020), as did daily use (24%; 21% in 2020). Price and availability of hydroponic and bush cannabis remained stable relative to 2020, although a significant change in perceived potency for both hydroponic ($p=0.001$) and bush cannabis ($p=0.001$) was observed between 2020 and 2021. Ten per cent of participants reported recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical CBD oil.

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine significantly increased from 43% in 2020 to 52% in 2021 ($p<0.001$), representing the largest per cent reporting recent use since the commencement of monitoring. Recent use of LSD remained stable (53% in 2021), while recent DMT use significantly increased, from 13% in 2020 to 18% in 2021 ($p=0.015$). Frequency of use for all three substances remained low and stable. Perceived purity remained stable for both ketamine and LSD, whilst the price of ketamine significantly increased from \$200 in 2020 to \$220 in 2021 ($p<0.001$). A significant change was observed in the perceived availability of ketamine ($p=0.030$) and LSD ($p=0.034$), with both drugs reported as easier to obtain in 2021.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Any NPS use, including plant-based NPS, has fluctuated over time, with 16% reporting recent use in 2021, stable from 2020 (15%). Two per cent of participants reported recent use of synthetic cannabinoids, a significant decrease from 4% in 2020 ($p=0.019$).

Other Drugs

Recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants significantly increased from 39% in 2020 to 46% in 2021 ($p=0.004$), as did the per cent reporting any recent hallucinogenic

mushroom (45%; 30% in 2020; $p<0.001$) and GHB/GBL/1,4-BD (9%; 6% in 2020; $p=0.049$) use. Alcohol and tobacco use were common, though both significantly decreased in 2021, with 96% reporting recent alcohol use (98% in 2020; $p=0.014$) and 73% reporting recent tobacco use (83% in 2020; $p<0.001$). In contrast, recent use of e-cigarettes significantly increased in 2021 to 58% (39% in 2020; $p<0.001$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, 89% of participants in 2021 reported concurrent use of two or more drugs (including alcohol, tobacco and e-cigarettes). Almost four in five (77%) participants obtained an AUDIT score of eight or more (81% in 2020; $p=0.025$), indicative of hazardous alcohol use. Reported past year non-fatal stimulant overdose remained stable between 2020 (18%) and 2021 (16%), whilst reported past year non-fatal alcohol overdose significantly decreased in 2021 (15%; 21% in 2020; $p=0.008$). Reported past month injecting drug use remained low (11%), as did current drug treatment engagement (3%). The majority of the sample (82%) reported engaging in sexual activity in the past four weeks, of which 22% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they did not know the HIV status of their partner. Over one-third (36%) of the sample reported having a sexual health check-up in the past six months. A significant increase was observed in the per cent reporting a mental health problem in the past six months (58%; 52% in 2020; $p=0.017$). One-quarter (25%) of the sample reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol, and 39% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, most commonly cannabis. Over one-third (36%) of the sample reported 'any' crime in the past month, with drug-dealing (23%) and property crime (18%) remaining the main forms of criminal activity in 2021. Face-to-face was the most popular means by which participants arranged the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the past 12 months (72%; 67% in 2020; $p=0.040$), followed by social networking applications (71%).