

Executive Summary

The Queensland (QLD) 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 Brisbane and the Gold Coast, Queensland. 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 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

The IDRS sample recruited from Brisbane/Gold Coast, Queensland (QLD) was consistent with the QLD profile in previous years, whereby half (53%) the sample was male, with a mean age of 44 years. The majority (83%) of the sample was unemployed at the time of interview, and most of the sample (93%) received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. Median weekly income significantly decreased in 2021, from \$540 in 2020 to \$356 in 2021 ($p<0.001$). There was a significant change in drug of choice amongst the sample between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.030$), with half (51%) the sample reporting that methamphetamine was their drug of choice, an increase from 33% in 2020. In contrast, heroin as participants' drug of choice decreased from 47% in 2020 to 32%. There was a significant change in the drug injected most in the last month ($p=0.022$), with just over half (55%) reporting methamphetamine was most often injected, an increase from 36% in 2020. Heroin being the drug injected most often in the past month decreased in 2021, from 42% in 2020 to 29% in 2021. Weekly or more frequent use of heroin significantly decreased in 2021 ($p=0.006$), whilst weekly or more frequent use

of crystal methamphetamine significantly increased ($p=0.023$).

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, 39% of the QLD sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, though no participants had been diagnosed with the virus. Twenty-eight per cent expressed any concern about contracting COVID-19, and 7% of participants reported that they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of interview.

Heroin

Notwithstanding some fluctuation, recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has generally decreased amongst the QLD sample since monitoring began. In 2021, a significant decrease was observed, with 43% of the sample reporting recent use (64% in 2020; $p=0.003$), the lowest per cent since monitoring began. Seventy-two per cent of those who had recently used heroin reported weekly or more frequent use in 2021. The reported median price of heroin remained stable at \$100 per point, with perceived purity and perceived availability also remaining stable between 2020 and 2021. The largest proportion of those able to comment perceived heroin as 'low' purity (30%) and, most (51%) perceived it as 'easy' to obtain.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine increased significantly in 2021 to 79% (63% in 2020; $p=0.020$). This was mostly driven by a continued increase in use of crystal methamphetamine (78%; 63% in 2020, $p=0.030$). A significant change in the availability of methamphetamine crystal was reported in 2021 ($p<0.001$), with more participants finding it 'easy' to obtain in 2021 (45%; 23% in 2020) or 'very easy' (32%; 18% in 2020), while less participants (17%)

perceived it as 'difficult' to obtain in 2021 (39% in 2020).

Cocaine

Twelve per cent of the QLD sample had recently consumed cocaine, stable from 19% in 2020, on a median of three days (IQR=2-4), consistent with 2020 reports. No participants reported using cocaine on a weekly or more frequent basis.

Cannabis

Recent use of cannabis has remained fairly consistent since 2014, with 68% reporting recent use in 2021, stable from 64% in 2020 ($p=0.688$). Almost one-third (31%) of those who had recently used cannabis reported using it on a daily basis, stable from 30% in 2020. Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (87%; 94% in 2020), followed by bush cannabis (35%; 44% in 2020). No market changes were observed in price, perceived purity or perceived availability. Among those able to answer, the majority (60%) perceived hydroponic cannabis to be 'high' in potency (51% in 2020), and 46% reported that hydroponic cannabis was 'very easy' to obtain (33% in 2020).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent non-prescribed use of buprenorphine (20%), buprenorphine-naloxone (11%), morphine (18%), oxycodone (10%) and fentanyl ($n\leq 5$) remained stable from 2020 to 2021.

Other Drugs

Nine per cent reported any recent NPS use ($n\leq 5$ in 2020). Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use remained stable in 2021 and was reported by 26% of participants (30% in 2020). Alcohol and tobacco use have remained consistently high over the period of monitoring, with 54% and 89% reporting recent use of alcohol and tobacco, respectively, in 2021. The median days of alcohol use increased significantly to 52 days (12 days in 2020; $p<0.001$). Twenty-one per cent of those who had recently consumed alcohol reported daily use, a significant increase from 2020 ($n\leq 5$; $p=0.007$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

In 2021, the majority (99%) of the QLD sample reported using one or more drugs on the day preceding interview. Nearly one-in-five (19%) reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug, with 12% reporting a past year non-fatal heroin overdose. The majority (60%) of the sample had heard of take-home naloxone programs, and 30% had been trained in naloxone administration. One-fifth (22%) reported distributive sharing of a needle, a significant increase from 7% in 2020 ($p=0.007$), and almost half (48%) reported injecting their partner/friend after injecting themselves. Two-fifths of the sample (42%) reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly nerve damage (27%). Almost half (45%) of the sample reported being in drug treatment at the time of interview, stable from 2020 (47%; $p=0.845$). Twenty-nine per cent of participants reported that they had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, 32% had received an RNA test and 9% reported having a current HCV infection. Self-reported past six-month mental health problems remained stable (61%; 56% in 2020), as did past month criminal activity (45%; 47% in 2020). Seven per cent of the QLD sample reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol and 37% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug. Nineteen 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% having done so in the past year.